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NOVELETS

HEPCATS OF VENUS
By Randall Garrett 10

THE HUMAN ZERO (Fantasy Classic)
By Earle Stanley Gardner .. 32

THIS IS YOUR DEATH
By Albert Teichner 84

SHORT STORIES

RAT RACE
By Paul Dellinger 77

ATONEMENT
By Jesse Roarke 112

THE EMPATHIC MAN
By Gordon Browne 117

FEATURES

ACCORDING TO YOU 6

EDITORIAL 8

COMING NEXT MONTH 76

Cover: LLOYD BIRMINGHAM

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

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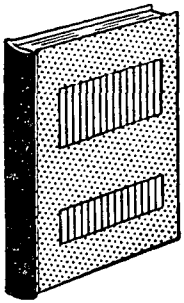

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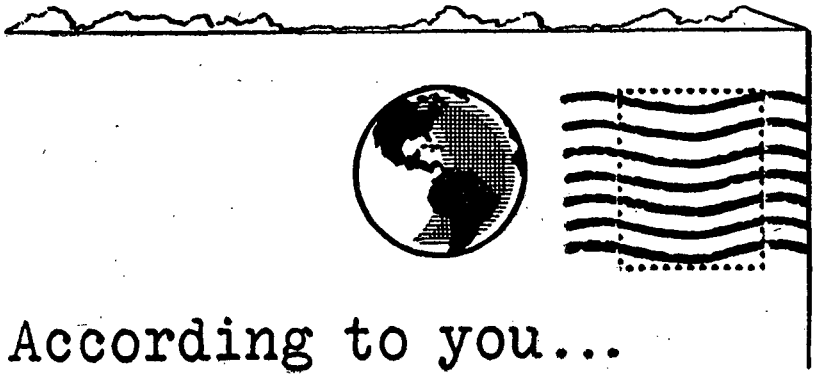

According to you...

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I seem to have started something when I criticized David Bunch and his less than appealing literary attempts. That wasn't really my intention—I only wanted to try to influence you to put those pages to more interesting use for us, the readers. In fact, I really didn't expect to see my letter in print, and your editorial comment after it left me with the thought that although a "Bunch of rain" may have fallen in my life in the past, it did not need to do so in the future. Realizing, though, that I have been enjoying the rest of the magazine so much that I would be "cutting off my nose to spite my face", as my grandmother would have said, if I failed to renew my subscription on Mr. Bunch's account, I decided that he wasn't worth the sacrifice.

I know we readers, for the most part, heaved a sigh of relief when Moderan and its tin can war faded into oblivion, as we hope. However, the change of pace exhibited by "A Small Miracle of Fishhooks and Straight Pins" was very little improvement.

I missed Mr. Greco's leap into the "Battle of Bunch" in the September issue, but dug it out to see what it contained when I flipped through the last few pages of the November issue and unexpectedly came upon my name in Mr. Turner's defense, for which I wish to thank him. I don't always read the letter column, considering it also a waste of precious story space, but I will admit that it *can* become interesting at times.

I cannot conceive any comparison between Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder and David

(*continued on page 123*)

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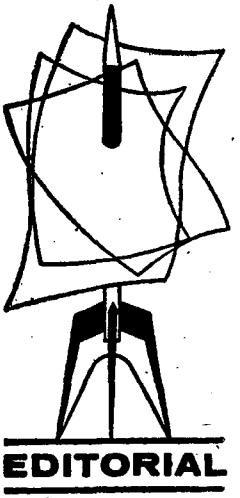

DON'T brood about it, but it is just possible that the centaurs described in Greek mythology may have been visitors to Earth from outer space.

This intelligence does not result from our having been visited recently by little men from flying saucers. It results from having read the sober report of anthropologist William Howells. His book, "Mankind in the Making," takes up the question of how intelligent life may have evolved on other planets.

Howells assumes certain basic postulates: that any alien intelligence comes equipped with a reasoning mind; with two sexes—"It is one of nature's most popular ideas," he says, able to move about on land and to fashion tools. But at this point Howells diverges from the main stream. He envisions an optimum creature as resembling a centaur.

"Do we," he asks, "do anything well that a centaur could not do better?"

According to Howells, man walks on two legs because he had only four limbs to begin with, and, if he wanted hands, had no other choice but to become bi-pedal. With four feet, Howells avers, man could be bigger and stronger, while retaining his intelligence and maneuverability. (Also there would be no problem with slipped discs and aching backs.)

"So," sums up the good professor, "I will lay a small bet that the first men from Outer Space will be neither bipeds nor quadrupeds, but bimanous quadrupedal hexapods" (six-limbed beings with two hands and four legs).

Returning to our point of departure, the widespread legends of such creatures in earth's early times lends some credence to the suggestion that Earth was visited, during its pre-history, by aliens. Thus it may behoove us to inquire whether perhaps some of the other legendary creatures are not also the vestiges of actual beings. But if an intelligent centaur ever appears again, it is unlikely that bards will create odes about him, however. More likely some jealous bimanous bipedal quadrupod will sneer and say: "Would you want your sister to marry a horse?"

N.L.

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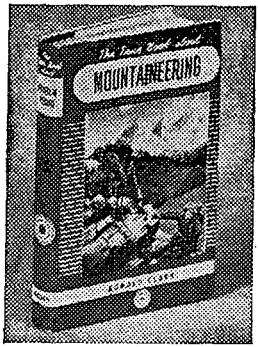

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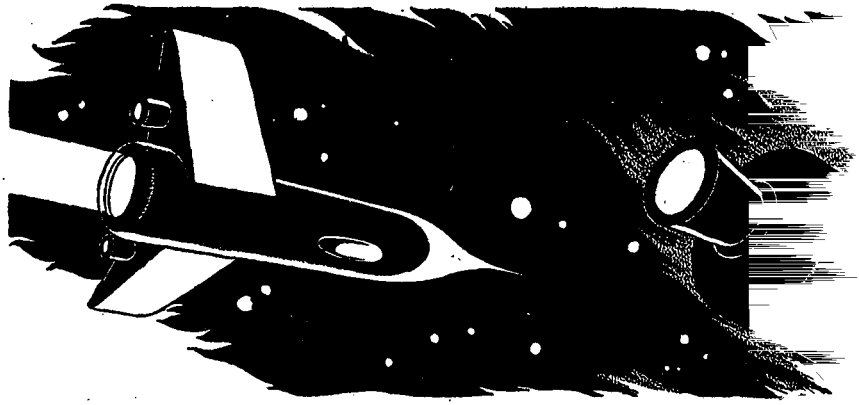

Hepcats of Venus

By RANDALL GARRETT

Illustrator FINLAY

A Galactic Observer is supposed to be all-knowing. But even the sharpest G.O. can hardly be faulted for being puzzled by the phenomenon of a jive trio in a beatnik hangout—especially when the instruments they play on are built-in!

THAT'S very odd," said Lady Curvert.

The sound that accompanied her voice was that of her egg spoon taking the top off her egg in its cup, so it is not remarkable that Lord Curvert, without lowering his copy of the *Times*, merely inquired: "Something wrong with the egg, my dear?"

"What? Egg? No, silly; it's this night club in New York."

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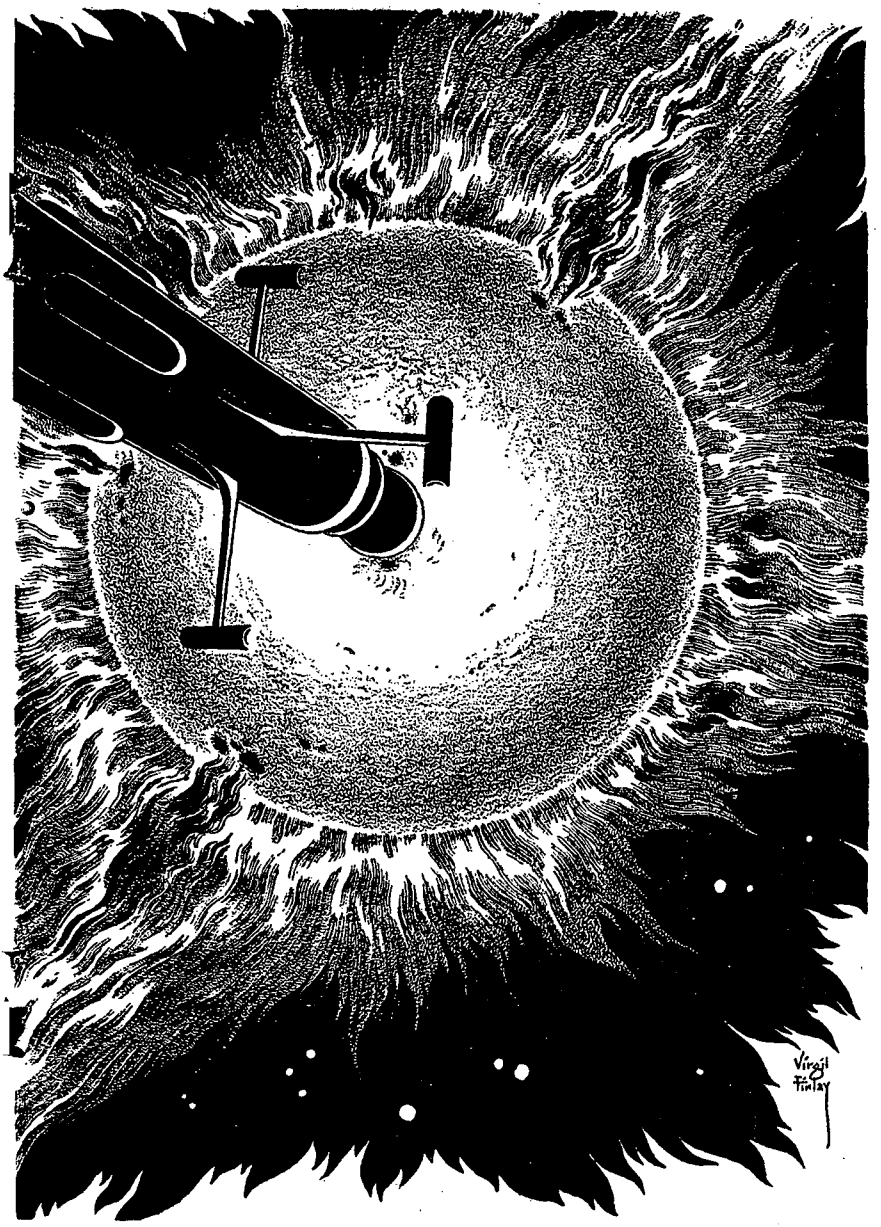

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Lord Curvert, well aware that his wife never remarked on anything of that sort without good reason, reluctantly lowered his newspaper and looked at her. She was absently spooning up egg with her right hand while her left held the tabloid upon which her gaze was fastened.

"What is it, Evelyn?" his lordship asked. "Something?"

"I'm not certain," she said. "Listen to this: 'The Village's newest and farthest-out *espresso*-teria, the *Venus Club*, is the latest subject of a quiet investigation by the Musician's Union, according to the B'way scuttlebutt. Seems that the weirdly-dressed musicos who are pulling in the jazz-lovers by the horde are too good to be believed. The management claims they're unpaid amateurs and don't need a union card, but the big-name pros who've heard them don't believe any amateur group could be that good. The "Venusian" get-ups they wear, which make them look as though the instruments they play are part of their bodies, make the players unrecognizable, and Union officials can't find out who they are. Since a combo as good as the "Venusians" could get hi-pay spots easily, according to Union officials, it doesn't make sense for them to keep on at the *Venus Club* unless they actually are getting something under the counter. If they are, the Union wants its cut.'" Lady Curvert looked up at her husband through glorious deep blue eyes. "Isn't that odd?"

His lordship blinked thoughtfully. "Odd, yes," he said after a moment, "but hardly world-shattering. I scarcely see how it concerns us."

Lady Curvert tapped the paper. "Venusians."

LORD CURVERT elevated an eyebrow a fraction of a millimeter. "My dear old girl," he said in a voice tinged with sarcasm, "the last time I was on Venus, back in 1948, nothing on that vast overheated Turkish bath had evolved any higher than the sponges. I hardly think that the succeeding fifteen years could have produced the intelligence required to beat out a hot rhythm on a set of bongo drums in a beatnik coffee house—though that is admittedly not such a tremendous leap in intelligence."

"I'm quite aware of that, Charles," his wife said coolly. "It's merely that this article has apparently started an intuitive chain-web in my mind. Something will come of it, I'm sure."

"Ah, I see." Lord Curvert was well aware of his wife's mental abilities. "Very well, my dear; when you've formed a full intuition, let me know. Meantime, I'll have some more kippers."

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Lord Curvert finished the kippers, the *Times*, and the coffee, excused himself, and headed toward the library, leaving his wife to continue her reading. She had already finished the American papers and had begun on *Pravda*. Within an hour, she would have all the salient points of the day's news filed away in her capacious and accurate memory, where her subconscious could get at them in its ceaseless work of forming the "hunches" that made Evelyn Curvert so useful in her position as Assistant to the Galactic Observer.

Fesswick, the butler,—tall, broadshouldered, a pluperfectly correct expression on his very human-looking face—was waiting for his lordship in the library.

"Good morning, Fesswick. Anything interesting this morning?"

"Very little, my lord," said Fesswick in his precise voice. "The instrument readings are normal. The Russians attempted to launch another of their new rockets at 0517 this morning. It exploded at 0521."

"They won't publish this failure, either," said Lord Curvert.

"Very likely not, my lord," said Fesswick. "According to the neutrino emission detectors, the new reactor at Tel-Aviv suffered a slight misfunction at 1143 last night. Nothing serious, but it was damped at 1144 and has remained so."

"Down for repairs, eh?" his lordship commented.

"Precisely so, my lord. Solar emission," Fesswick continued, "remains normal. The . . ."

Fesswick took nearly seven minutes more to deliver his report of the happenings of the past twenty-four hours as they had been recorded on the special instruments concealed within the depths of Castle Curvert. They had been reporting their data precisely since they had been built into the castle, six hundred years before, and they would go on doing so until they were shut off—or destroyed.

All in all, everything was quite normal.

LORD CURVERT sat down behind his desk and sighed gently. "Rather dull, isn't it, Fesswick? I mean, we haven't had any real excitement since that squadron of Mizarian ships got off course and tried to land, back in '47." He gazed reminiscently at the ceiling. "Had the devil's own time with them for a while, there."

"A masterful piece of work on your part, if I may say so."

"Thank you," his lordship said absently. "Fesswick has it occurred to you that our work may soon be completed on this planet?"

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"The thought has crossed my mind, my lord."

"They've come up fast, Fesswick. In another half century, they may be ready to go to the stars, and a hidden Observer will no longer be necessary. Still, it's been interesting, hasn't it?"

"*Very* interesting, my lord."

There was a note in Fesswick's voice that made Lord Curvert look curiously at his butler. He had always regarded Fesswick as —well, as part of the machinery. He was simply *there*. He had *always* been there. To imagine Castle Curvert without Fesswick was to imagine Egypt without the pyramids. And yet—

"You've been with the family for a long time, haven't you, Fesswick?"

Instead of answering immediately, Fesswick turned to look at the shield on the wall, upon which was emblazoned the Curvert arms—*Vert, on a pale or, a heart of the field.*

There was pride in Fesswick's voice when he spoke. "In a sense, my lord, I have only been with the family four generations. I was sent in as a new model to replace my predecessor in the year 1155, shortly after your great-grandfather was created the first Baron du Coeur Vert by Henry II for his services following the overthrow of the unhappy usurper, Stephen. Those were exciting times, my lord." He turned to face his master again.

"In another sense, my lord," he went on, "I have been with the family much longer. Since all the pertinent memories were transferred from the brain of my predecessor to my own, I have a sense of continuity that goes back to the establishment of the Observership, more than eight thousand years ago."

Lord Curvert, who had scarcely entered his twelfth decade, felt suddenly humble before the majesty of eighty centuries of time.

THERE was a rap at the door. "Charles!" The door opened before either Fesswick or Lord Curvert could answer, and Lady Curvert swept in. "Ah, there you are. Good morning, Fesswick. Charles, I have arrived at a full intuition. The Thregonnese. We should investigate at once."

"The metamorphs of Thregonn? Good heavens, you don't say so!" Lord Curvert stood up from his chair. "But how could they have come here?"

Lady Curvert shook her head. "I can't tell you that."

His lordship looked at Fesswick. "How about that, Fesswick, old man? Could a spaceship have landed recently without registering on the detectors?"

"Highly unlikely, my lord."

Lord Curvert looked back at his wife. "Fesswick says it's highly unlikely, my dear."

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"My intuition is never wrong, Charles," Lady Curvert replied with dignity.

"That's true, eh, Fesswick?"

"Quite true, my lord. Her ladyship has never been known to err in matters of intuition."

"Very well, then; given the datum that there are Thregonnese on the planet, the question is: how did they get here? That seems to me to be logically deducible, which puts it in your department."

"I shall endeavor to give satisfaction, my lord." His high speed robotic brain was capable of working such problems in minute fractions of a second, so he continued without a pause: "It is obvious, my lord, that, in order to get here from Thregonn, the metamorphs must have come by interstellar vessel. The only way such a vessel could have entered the Solar System without registering on the detectors would be to utilize a screen that would prevent the telltale wake from the drive energies from reaching us."

"But there is no such screen, Fesswick," Lady Curvert objected.

"With all due apologies, my lady," said Fesswick, "there *is* such a screen. The Sun itself. Interstellar drive energies cannot penetrate through the core of a star without absorption."

"Then their ship must have entered the Solar System by coming in from the opposite side of the Sun from Earth?" Lady Curvert said.

"Precisely so, my lady."

"But look here, Fesswick," said his lordship, "that's all very well for getting them into the Solar System, but it doesn't answer at all for getting them to Earth itself. So far, you've gotten them a hundred million miles from Earth, with the Sun between us. The question is: How did they get *here?*"

"The *Viper,* my lord," said Fesswick imperturbably.

"The *Viper?*"

EXACTLY, my lord. The Venus Interplanetary Probe Electro-Rocket. It was, if you will recall, an unmanned, automatic probe rocket designed to make an orbit close to Venus, take photographs, and return to Earth—an orbit which necessitated its being, for a time, on the opposite side of the Sun from Earth."

"Oh, yes. I remember seeing the photographs in the *Times.* Quite good ones they were, too," Lord Curvert said musingly. "Then, while the *Viper* was on the other side of the Sun, the Thregonnese simply attached a capsule to the side of it and rode it back to Earth."

"Exactly, my lord. It could have been done in no other way."

"The timing is exactly right,

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too," said Lord Curvert thoughtfully. "Naturally, we had no reason to suspect anything at the time; it was simply another American rocket returning home. It landed in the Pacific, as I recall, and the American Navy didn't find it for nearly an hour—plenty of time for the Thregonnese to detatch their capsule and be on their way. Probably used a distorter to foul up the Navy's radar a bit, so that it would take more time to find the *Viper*."

"Without doubt, my lord," Fesswick agreed.

"Very ingenious of them," said his lordship. "Very. But you see what this implies, don't you? They have been on Earth for nearly a year—for what purpose we have, as yet, no notion. And now, suddenly, they advertise their presence almost blatantly.

"Their very method of entry shows that they are aware of the presence of a Galactic Observer on this planet, so one would think that they would do their best to remain in concealment."

"Do you fear a trap, Charles?" Lady Curvert asked calmly.

"Let us say that, at the very least, they are attempting to draw the attention of the Galactic Observer, and that they have succeeded. Why? They want to find out who the Galactic Observer is; they want to be able to put their finger on me, as it were.

"On the other hand, this is almost *too* blatant to be a trap. They not only advertise their presence, but practically tell me how they got here. It's almost as if they wanted me to recognize it as a trap. Still, that seems a little too much, doesn't it? We don't have all the data as yet, and, as a chap I used to know once remarked, 'It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement.' "

"Shall I begin preparations, my lord?" asked Fesswick.

"Immediately. That's where they've baited their hook very nicely, you see; we have no choice but to investigate. However, we shall take every precaution." He frowned suddenly. "By the by, Fesswick, I am scheduled to address the House of Lords tomorrow. We'll have to send a proxy. Fortunately, I've already written the speech."

"Shall I attend to it personally, my lord?"

"By no means! I want you *here*—at the controls."

"Certainly, my lord. I'll send Elsie, the upstairs maid; she should be able to carry out the deception competently."

"Quite. Now, let's get with it, Fesswick. The game, as my friend used to remark, is afoot."

DURING the reign of Queen Victoria, when the British Empire was at its peak, Lord

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Curvert had had the opportunity of chuckling inwardly—though deploring outwardly—when he was told of the horrible fate that might face an Englishman stationed in some far-off place. Accompanied by a sad shake of the head, the story usually went something like this: "Terrible thing about Lord Greystoke. Hadn't you heard? Greystoke's gone native. Africa, you know. Deplorable. Doesn't even dress for dinner any more, so I hear."

What caused Lord Curvert's inward mirth was, of course, that the first thing a Galactic Observer did when stationed on a planet was to "go native". One not only had to blend in, one had to change with the times. One had to age one's appearance slowly and bring up "children"—parts played by one or more of the robots—and then, at the right time, one became one's own son while a robot played the older man and finally "died". Such things required a chameleonlike ability to adapt, to change one's personality as one might change one's hat.

Thus it is not to be considered remarkable that Ben and Cordelia Holler, who stepped out of a dark alley near Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, bore no resemblance whatever to Lord and Lady Curvert, either in appearance or manner.

"Do we make the scene here for a bit," Cordelia asked, "or do we cut out for New York soonest?"

"We cut out for N. Y., chick," Ben said. "Those squares might have pegged us if we'd used a teleporter into the Village, but they won't dig the G.O. making it on a jet plane. Let's get this wild gig going, chicky."

They walked out into the fog-filled light that spilled from the street lamps.

Ben chuckled. "Let's grab a cab. I mean, like we got bread to blow, so let's blow it."

She grinned up at him. "Crazy, man! I mean, *real* crazy!"

A FEW hours later, they were in Manhattan.

The roundabout method of arrival had been absolutely necessary. If Fesswick, at the controls of the teleportation projector, had put them directly in New York, there was a slight chance that the Thregonnese detectors might have registered the activity of the materialization field. On the other hand, it was necessary to get into the United States without going through the formality of passing through Immigration and Customs.

"First thing, baby," Ben said as they came out of the subway exit at Waverly Place, "is to tag us a pad. Dig? Then we make the scene at the Kettle and a couple of the other cool spots for kicks."

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BEN and Cordelia made the scene in the Village for seven days before they went anywhere near the Venus Club. They didn't want to seem anxious, so they played it cool. They strolled into the Venus Club late one Friday evening, and the joint was really swinging. The kookiest-looking quartet this side of an H-kick nightmare were blowing out a beat crazy enough to make any cat flip his gasket.

Ben and Cordelia sat down, ordered a couple espressos, and kept playing it cool, just digging the whole bit.

The four musicians were hot; there was no question of that. And cool at the same time. But both Ben and Cordelia could tell at a glance that they were not—definitely not—human beings dressed up in fancy suits. They varied in color from pale pink to deep purple—a drummer, a trumpeter, a clarinetist, and a bass viol player. The lips of the trumpeter and the clarinetist formed the instruments they played. The bass player's belly formed the sounding box of his instrument, with the strings running from his nose to a point below where his navel should have been. The drummer's belly ballooned out like a kettledrum, with a flat drumhead just below his sternum.

It was easy to see why they had been able to pass themselves off as dressed-up humans; the "costumes" looked too outre, too artificial to be real. But the dead giveaway was the drummer.

He had four arms.

Try *that* with a costume sometime!

"Frantically cool," said Cordelia.

Ben scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "I'm hip," he agreed.

They were Thregonnese, all right. There was no other race in the known Galaxy that could change the shape of their bodies that way.

The bass player stepped out from the others and began chanting in time to the music. At first, it seemed to be nothing but nonsense syllables of the *rooty-ooty-yeek-yeek-boo-da-da* type, then both Ben and Cordelia recognized that he was chanting in a jazzed-up version of Basic Galactic, the *lingua franca* of space.

"Hey, Observer, give us a buzz!
We're in trouble like never was!
Every night we sing this bit,
Hoping you'll be digging it.
Listen, G.O., to our moan;
Kindly call us on the phone!
Listen to our wailing yelp;
What we mean is: Man, like—help!"

There was a long wailing note on the trumpet and a little flurry of sobs from the coronet, and the piece ended with a teeth-rattling roll from the drum.

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"COOL," said Cordelia, crushing out her cigarette.

"Frantically cool," agreed Ben. He looked at his wristwatch. "Time to cut out now, but we will definitely have to make this scene tomorrow."

They finished their coffee and strolled out. By then, the musicians had left the bandstand and were nowhere to be seen.

Cordelia waited until they were a full block away before she spoke. "Do we give them a buzz? What kind of crazy hassle do you figure they're hung up in?"

"You got no hunch?"

"Man, like I dig them the least. Can it hurt to phone?"

"Don't know, chick. Maybe we ought to—"

He thought it over for a minute. Which would be best—to sneak up on them quietly, without letting them know he was anywhere around, and hit all four of them fast—or to take them at their word and call them on the phone?

The trouble was that it was impossible to trust a Thregonnese any farther than you could throw a bonfire by the smoke. The metamorphs of Thregonn weren't vicious, but they were charcterized by a low sense of humor and a way of thinking that was definitely weird by human standards.

He decided he'd chance it. He said, "Come on, chick," and went into a drug store on the next corner. He got the number of the Venus Club and dialed it.

"Venus Club," said a voice.

"You're under arrest," said the Observer in clipped Galactic.

"Are you the Observer?" asked the voice in the same language.

"That's right. And you know you're not supposed to be on this planet. It's still under quarantine."

"Believe me," said the other, "I wouldn't be here at all if I could get away. None of us would. For a while, there, we were afraid maybe you'd never notice us."

"So far," said the Observer, "you haven't attracted the attention of the local authorities, but if you do, I'll slap a charge against you that will—"

"Hey, now!" the Thregonnese interrupted. "We know the law! This was only a misdemeanor. Landing for refueling without authorization, is all."

"*I'll* tell *you* what the law is," the Observer said. "Now, what's all this fuss about, anyhow?"

"Well, first of all, it started out as a joke. You know?"

"Sure. I know all about it," the Observer said sarcastically. "That's why I'm spending my time asking you questions. What the hell happened?"

"Well, there was this bet, see. Lubix, Forbin, Alisnokine, and I had bet some friends of ours that we could come in here, land,

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pick up a—uh—a souvenir, and come back without your catching us. Without even knowing we'd been here. See?"

"So far, yes," said the Observer in a very cold voice.

"Well, the guys we were betting against must've got cute," the Thregonnese went on. "They bollixed up our space capsule, and we couldn't take off again. And now that the U.S. Navy has the capsule, we can't do anything about it at all."

"The U.S. Navy? Now wait a minute; you can't . . ."

Then he heard sudden loud noises from the phone, a voice in English said, "Chiggers! The cops!" and the line went dead.

Cordelia, who had been standing near the doorway of the drugstore, where she could watch the door of the Venus Club, walked over to the phone booth and said, in a low voice, "Like, some cops just went in. Wonder what they're bugged about?"

"I hope," Ben said fervently, "that those cats don't goof now. Otherwise, we'll all be in the soup!"

LORD CURVERT glared at his copy of the New York *Daily News* in a medium dudgeon. There, looking out from the front page with idiotic grins, were four of the most disreputable-looking men his lordship had ever had the misfortune to gaze upon.

"At least," he said grudgingly, "they managed to metamorphose into reasonably human shape before they were arrested. I hate to think what might have happened if the police had arrested them while they were still in the outlandish shapes they were wearing when we saw them last."

Lady Curvert sipped at her tea and looked at the headlines.

VENUS CLUB OWNERS NABBED IN NARCOTICS RAID

$10,000 Heroin Cache Found in Coffee House

"It's ridiculous," said her ladyship rather peevishly. "It makes no sense at all! Why should four Thregonnese want to do anything so silly as use or sell heroin? They couldn't have become addicted to it, could they, Charles?"

"I think not. Incompatible metabolism, eh, Fesswick?"

Fesswick placed more buttered toast on the small tray next to the marmalade pot. "Quite incompatible, my lord. Heroin would kill a Thregonnese within three minutes if injected into the bloodstream. Sniffing it, as I believe is often done by addicts, would cause unconsciousness very rapidly."

"Then why should they do anything so silly?" her ladyship repeated.

"I confess, my lady, that I am thus far unable to deduce the machinations lying behind these

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highly peculiar circumstances," Fesswick admitted.

Lord Curvert poured himself another cup of tea. "All the data we have thus far aren't worth a ha'penny for the lot. The story they gave me over the telephone was that they had come to Earth on a bet, to pick up a souvenir of some kind, that one of the Thregonnese betting against them had done something to their space capsule, and that somehow —Heaven only knows how!—the United States Navy has gained possession of the capsule. All of which could be a tissue of lies from one end to the other, damn it." He looked searchingly at his butler. "What's *your* opinion, Fesswick?"

"The story as it stands, my lord, is not consistent with the facts as we know them, but that is merely to say that we have no conclusive evidence of any kind."

Lord Curvert snorted at that and looked at his wife. "And how is your intuition this morning, my dear?"

"Well, Charles," she said, smiling rather timidly, "I have a feeling you ought to do *something*—but I'm not at all sure what."

"Well, damn it all, we *have* to do something! The family has held the Observership perfectly for eight thousand years—guarded Earthmen from interference, so that they could develop their own civilization. I'm not going to have that record spoilt by four Thregonnese clowns!"

"Couldn't we just help them to escape with the teleporter?" Lady Curvert asked helpfully. "Then you could put the collars on them and ship them off."

"Don't be an idiot," his lordship growled, staring into his teacup.

Lady Curvert looked hurt.

"It can't be done, my lady," Fesswick said quietly. "We used to be able to do such things easily, but, in these days, when the cells of a modern gaol are made of steel, we find ourselves hampered by the fact that a teleporter field is badly distorted if one attempts to project it into a metal-enclosed space."

"Dear me," said Lady Curvert. She looked at her husband, saw that he was far too deep in thought to be disturbed, and turned back to Fesswick. "Is there anything at all you and I can do?"

"Not, I'm afraid, at the moment, my lady," said the robot with dignity. "When both Logic and Intuition have failed, we must resort to Action and Ingenuity, and those are in his lordship's department." He poured Lady Curvert another cup of tea. "I am quite sanguine, my lady, over the prospect of his lordship's solving the problem very shortly. He always has."

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THE police chemist who took the small package of heroin from the safe to analyze it was very careful with the stuff. His job was to run it through an analysis so that he could testify in court that it really was heroin. He didn't let the package out of his sight for more than thirty seconds.

Which was plenty long enough.

He was setting up his testing apparatus, so he didn't see a long-fingered, aristocratic hand appear out of nowhere, take the package, and replace it with an exactly similar one.

When the contents of the package turned out to be sugar, the chemist was surprised. The District Attorney was more than surprised; he was furious.

But there was nothing that either of them could do.

There was even more surprise in Castle Curvert when Fesswick reported his own analysis of the powder to his master.

"The substance, my lord," he said in his precise voice, "is not heroin."

"Not heroin?" said his lordship.

"No, my lord. It is Varesh powder."

"Ah-hah!" his lordship expostulated. "And they brought plenty of it, didn't they?"

"Yes, my lord. Enough, shall we say, to hypnotize every government official on Earth, if that became necessary. It only needs to be activated."

"Things are beginning to fall into place, Fesswick."

"Yes, my lord."

"Lost their equipment, didn't they, Fesswick?" he said, grinning.

"It would appear so, my lord," said Fesswick, returning the grin.

"The next step, Fesswick, is to appear to fall in with their nefarious plan."

"Yes, my lord. I shall begin preparation immediately."

OMBOSER, Lubix, Forbin, and Alsnokine stepped out of the court building and walked down the imposing-looking steps toward the sidewalk.

"It's about time they let us out," Omboser snarled in Thregonnese. "I knew that as soon as they analyzed the Varesh powder they would realize that it was not one of their local drugs—but I didn't know it would take the primitive fools that long to analyze it."

Lubix patted the pocket of the suit he was wearing. "Well, we got it back, and that's what's important."

"You idiots!" Forbin hissed, "cease your chatter! The Galactic Observer could be anywhere around."

They all glanced around apprehensively. Alsnokine whispered,

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"Do you think he can speak or understand Thregonnese?"

"Probably not," said Forbin, "but there's no need of talking loud enough for everyone to hear."

"What I want to know," Lubix said as they headed toward the subway entrance, "is, who's the creep who called the cops on us?"

"That character from the Musician's Union, obviously," said Omboser. "If Alsnokine hadn't acted so guilty when he came into the office, nothing would have happened."

"What was I supposed to do? Leave it out there for him to look at?" Alsnokine asked defensively. "How could I know he wasn't the Observer himself?"

"Quit arguing, you two!" Forbin snapped. "We haven't lost anything but a little time. Let's get back to the club and hope that the Observer will contact us again."

"If Omboser hadn't been such a blockhead," Alsnokine began, "we wouldn't . . ."

"Ahh, shut *up!*" said Forbin.

WHEN they reached the Venus Club, a little more than a mile north of the station at Centre Street, Omboser produced his key, unlocked the front door, and went in, followed by his three co-conspirators. They stopped suddenly at the sight of a tall, rather handsome, impeccably dressed gentleman who was seated at a table in the middle of the room, sipping at a small cup of espresso.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said with utter aplomb. "That machine of yours makes quite excellent coffee." He was speaking very cultivated Galactic.

"The Observer," the four Thregonnese said in a ragged chorus.

"Exactly," said Lord Curvert. "You may refer to me as Mr. Smith. Not as original an alias, perhaps, as, say, 'Sebastian Tombs', but it will suffice. Now, to which of you was I speaking when the local constabulary so precipitately interrupted?"

"That was me," said Omboser.

"Then pray sit down, make yourselves comfortable, and tell me all about your troubles. Consider me your Father Confessor, and tell all."

They sat down slowly, all four pairs of eyes focused steadily on the intruder.

Finally, Omboser smiled. "Well, sir, as I was saying," he began, "we had this little bet, you see. We knew it was illegal, but it was just a harmless prank. We were to come here, and then go back, that's all. Nobody would be hurt, nobody would be the wiser, and we would win our bet. See?"

"I understand so far," Lord Curvert said agreeably. "Then what happened?"

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"Well . . ." Omboser began very hesitantly.

"This idiot," said Forbin, pointing a thumb at Omboser, "was supposed to stay behind with our capsule. Instead, he went swimming."

"It gets pretty boring, doing nothing," said Omboser pettishly.

"He went swimming," Forbin repeated. "We had the capsule underwater, in a little bay at Lukiuni Atoll, out in the Pacific."

"There was nobody on the atoll at all," Omboser said. "It looked perfectly all right to go swimming."

"Nevertheless," Forbin continued, "while Omboser was out cavorting—he'd changed himself into a porpoise for the purpose—a United States Navy patrol plane spotted the capsule from the air."

"I told you we should have sunk it in deeper water," Omboser said.

Forbin ignored him. "By the time Omboser got back from his spree, the U. S. Navy was in charge—with a light cruiser. Since we'd left most of our eqipment in the capsule, we didn't even have the instruments we needed to sneak in and get the capsule back."

"The Navy thinks the capsule is a Russian job," Lubix supplied helpfully. "They haven't opened it yet, because they're afraid there might be a thermonuclear bomb inside it. But they've sure got it surrounded while they try to figure out what to do."

"So," Forbin finished, "we figured we'd better get in touch with you and tell you what happened. We rented this place and put on a show that we thought would attract your attention without revealing ourselves to the natives. It took us a long time to get the hang of how things are done on this planet, though. Otherwise, we'd've done this sooner."

Then all four of them sat there in silence, watching the Observer, waiting for his decision.

Lord Curvet thought the matter over carefully, then came to a decision. "Very well, my fumble-fingered friends, we'll see what can be done." He looked up into the air a foot or so above his head. "Rally round, Mr. Jones," he said, "there's work to be done."

The calm voice of Fesswick came out of the air. "Anytime you're ready, Mr. Smith."

SERGEANT Thaddeus McClusky, USMC, shrugged his shoulder a little to adjust the weight of the heavy machine rifle that was slung there. So did Corporal Quinn. Both of them looked with respectful eyes at Lieutenant (jg) Fordham, USN, and

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listened silently as he spoke.

"Remember, men; that may be an atomic bomb, down there, so keep on your toes. Absolutely no one is allowed to pass inside this perimeter after dark. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Segeant McClusky.

"Yes, sir," said Corporal Quinn.

"Very well. Carry on."

Salutes were exchanged, and the two Marines waited silently while the Naval officer went on down the line to the next post. As soon as he was out of earshot, McClusky muttered a dirty word. ". . . deckape shavetail,' he added.

"That's the way the goddam Navy operates," said Quinn philosophically. "We been here six months watching that gizmo while the Navy sits on its duff and wonders what to do about it. And what do they do? Why, they send us a fresh jaygee from Stateside who tells us to do exactly what we been doin' all along. That takes real brains, that does."

Sergeant McClusky nodded his agreement. "'Remember, that may be an atomic bomb, down here, so keep on your toes,'" he mimicked. "Well, you can just bet your stripey little shoulder boards we will, sir. Yes, sir. We'll watch very closely, sir, and if that thing goes off, we'll call you right up on the telephone, sir. Won't we, Corporal Quinn?"

"Just as fast as ever we can," agreed Corporal Quinn. "We will be moving very rapidly, Sergeant McClusky."

They turned to look at the little, shallow lagoon which held the unknown thing. There were no lights illuminating it; the Navy didn't want to attract the attention of any high-flying Russian planes that might be looking the area over. But the light of a tropical full moon cast its silvery radiance over the glittering waters of the lagoon.

The thing itself had been surrounded with a steel net to keep large fish from approaching it and—possibly—setting it off. Underwater sonar constantly probed the depths to make sure that Russian frogmen didn't try to sneak in. The Navy didn't think the Russians knew where their toy was, but they were taking no chances.

YOU know," said McClusky, "when I was a kid, I used to love those movies of the South Seas. Remember? They had scenes in 'em just like this."

"Yeah," Quinn agreed softly. "Tropical moon—sea breezes—palm trees gently waving—waves rolling softly against the warm sands."

"That's very poetic," McClusky said in mild astonishment.

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"I remember it from an old movie ad," Quinn said.

"All we need is some guitar music," McClusky said.

"Yeah. And Dorothy Lamour in a sarong."

"Will I do?" asked a soft, throaty contralto voice from behind them.

Both men spun around, unslinging their rifles with the easy grace of long practice.

Then they froze, as if someone had doused them with a few gallons of liquid air. Their eyes glazed, and their mouths hung agape.

It was not Dorothy Lamour, they decided, because she was not wearing a sarong. She was not even wearing a grass skirt.

Sergeant McClusky recovered jis voice. "You ain't supposed to be here, dressed like that, ma'am," he said to the vision of loveliness.

"Undressed like that," Corporal Quinn corrected automatically.

"Even if you was dressed," said McClusky, "you hadn't ought to be here. Women aren't allowed on this island." He was still trying to figure out what to do when a voice bellowed out from the next post down the shore.

"Corporal of the guard! Post Number Five! I got a woman on my post—a *nekkid* woman! Whadda I do now?"

Before Corporal Quinn could answer, two more posts called out that they had the same trouble.

"Why all the fuss?" asked the girl, wide-eyed. "We just want to go swimming in your pretty lagoon."

"No, you don't," said McClusky, recovering his wits at last. "You're under arrest, lady." He reached out to grab her with one brawny fist, but his hand closed on empty air. The girl was deceptively fast. She backed away, still smiling, and McClusky made another lunge for her.

He missed and lost his balance as she danced back out of the way. As he fell forward, he heard Quinn yell: "Halt! Halt or I fire!"

He broke his fall with the butt of his rifle, and twisted to an upright sitting position. The girl, he noticed, was running away from the lagoon, toward the sea, with Quinn after her in hot pursuit, still calling for her to halt.

All around, there were similar cries. Sergeant McClusky wondered how many unclad females there were running around on Lukiuni Atoll—where there couldn't possibly be any women.

NOT a man there noticed what was going on out in the lagoon itself. The figure of a man suddenly materialized from nowhere a few inches above the surface of the water. Then he

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dropped in with scarcely a splash.

Since Fesswick did not breathe, there was no necessity for him to wear any of the usual diving equipment. All he had to do was swim to the steel net, cut through it, and head for the little Thregonnese space capsule. He wasn't the least bit worried about the Navy's probing sonar beams; the nullifiers operated by Lord Curvert would take care of them. As far as the sonar operators could tell, there was nothing at all unusual in the lagoon.

Fesswick got busy opening the airlock of the little capsule.

Up on shore, Sergeant McClusky yelled at Corporal Quinn, who was several yards away, at the sea's edge, staring into the waves. Lights were coming on all over the tiny atoll. Pounding footsteps could be heard from every quarter as confused men ran every which way.

"She just dived into the sea and never came up," Corporal Quinn was saying wonderingly.

"Why didn't you shoot?" bellowed McClusky.

"Who the hell do you think I am?" Quinn bellowed back. "Mike Hammer?"

So far, nobody else had fired a shot, either, and by that time, all four of the Tregonnese had dived into the sea, changed into porpoises, and were swimming rapidly away from the atoll.

The final surprise came when, with a great geyser of erupting water, the Tregonnese space capsule shot up out of the lagoon and vanished rapidly into the moonlit sky.

There would be a lot of explaining to do that night and for many nights to come, in Navy circles.

But there would never be any explanation.

AND now," said Lord Curvert gently, "the question arises as to what to do with you gentlemen."

They were sitting in the Venus Club again. The space capsule, indetectable to any Earth science, was sitting on the roof of the building.

"Why, just make your report and let us go," Forbin said politely. "It was only a misdemeanor. We haven't done anything felonious. We didn't expose anything to the natives or interfere in any way. Just let us go, and we'll pay the fine according to the law."

Lord Curvert was nodding slowly, and there was an oddly sleepy look in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Certainly. Just let you go."

The Thregonnese looked at each other with delight, and then looked back at the Observer.

"Or, better yet," said Forbin insidiously, "just let us stay for a while. How about that?"

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"Yes. Yes," his lordship said rather glassily. "I could just let you stay for a while."

"As a matter of fact," Forbin went on in the same tone, "we have a few favors we'd like you to do for us."

"Favors," said Lord Curvert. "Certainly. What favors?"

"Well, for instance, why don't you stand on your head?"

"Certainly."

"And click your heels together," added Omboser, ignoring the scowls that Forbin and the others shot him.

"Certainly," agreed his lordship. Placing hands and head on the floor, Lord Curvert solemnly upended himself, balanced carefully, and clapped his heels together.

"We've done it!" Forbin said gleefully. "We're in!"

"You sure that assistant of his —that Mr. Jones can't reach us here?" Alsnokine asked, a trifle apprehensively. "Or see us?"

"Not a chance," Forbin said. "I turned on the nullifiers in our ship myself."

"We've done it," Lubix gloated. "In spite of all the setbacks, we have our ship, and we have the Observer. Now we can start having a little fun."

"Are you gentlemen just going to leave me like this?" Lord Curvert asked politely.

They all turned to look at him.

He did a neat handspring-and-flip, and landed on his feet. "A confession of intent," he said mildly, "is bad enough. When combined with an actual attempt, it becomes very bad indeed."

None of them said anything.

"Oh, no," his lordship went on, "I'm not hypnotized. In the first place, the substance you have been thinking is Varesh powder is nothing but powdered sugar. I saw you put it in the activator in your capsule, and I saw you put a pinch of it into the air. But I'm afraid sugar just doesn't have the proper effect.

"In the second place, even if it had been Varesh powder, nothing would have happened, because I am wearing filter plugs in my nostrils, just as you are. The one difference is that my plugs function, while yours don't.

"I'm afraid that while my assistant, Mr. Jones, was in your capsule, he put a few rather clever little gimmicks into your controls. In addition, he sprayed a little genuine Varesh powder through the teleporter just a few seconds ago. And it's having its effect, isn't it?"

IT was. Robbed of their conscious volition, the human body shapes which the Thregonnese had assumed were beginning to look oddly lumpy as they tended to return to their normal shapes.

"I am sending you back to

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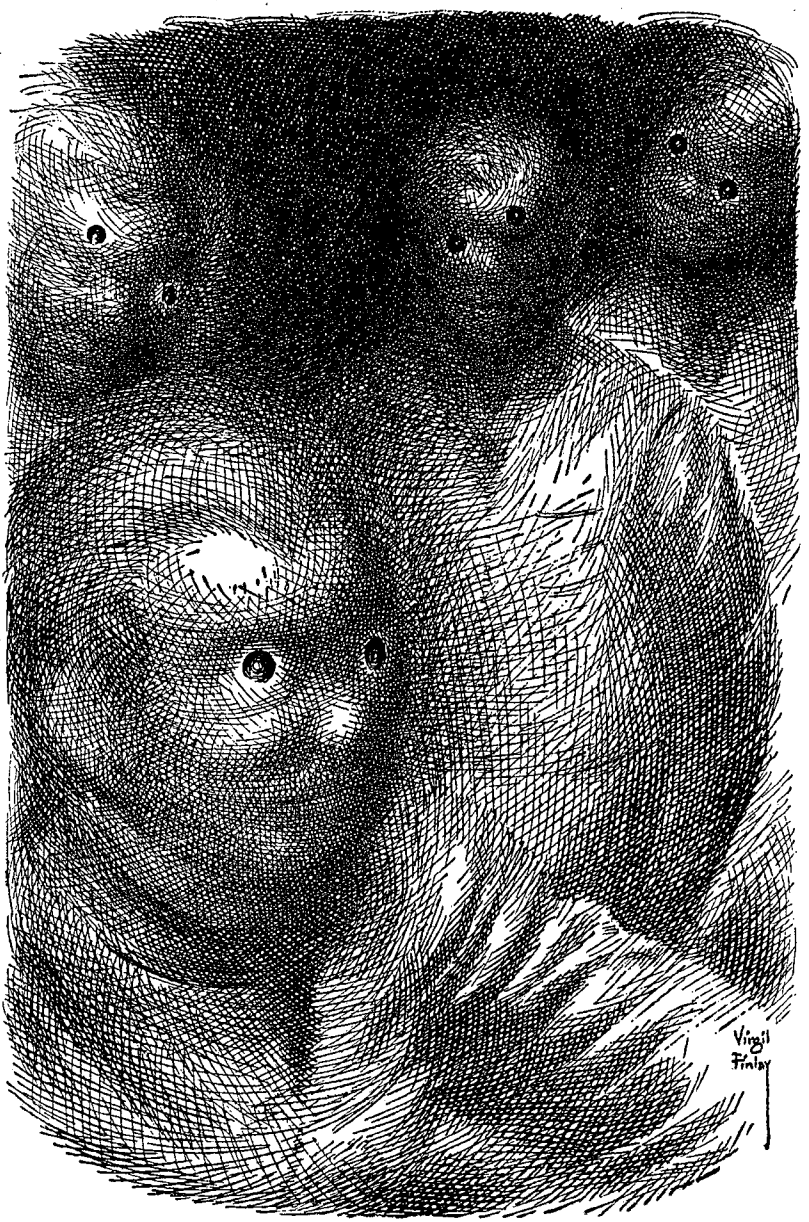

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Thregonn for punishment," he said. "I'll tell you what the conspiracy was, and you correct me if I'm wrong, so that everything will be nice and legal.

"You intended to use this Venus Club set-up to trap me first. Then, after I had been hypnotized, you intended to take over the various governments of Earth. Now, there, I'm a little hazy—just what was your reason for wanting to take over? Were you going to set yourselves up as supreme dictators, so that you could push everybody around?" He looked at Forbin as he spoke.

"For a while," admitted the thoroughly hypnotized Forbin. "Then, if we got bored, we thought it might be fun to start an atomic war among these primitive people."

"Worse than I thought," said Lord Curvert distastefully. "I hope they straighten you out thoroughly on Thregonn."

By this time, the four Thregonnese had returned to their "normal" shape. They looked like four fat, pink kewpie dolls.

"All right," said Lord Curvert, "let's go. You'll get in your ship and go straight to Thregonn, understand?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused. "Straight to Thregonn."

"And just to make sure you do, you'll give yourselves another dose of Varesh powder every twenty-four hours. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"Fine. Let's go."

They went up to the roof, and the four fat kewpies climbed into the vessel. The airlock closed, and a few seconds later the little spaceship fired skywards.

"Take me home, Fesswick," said Lord Curvert.

"THAT'S very odd," said Lady Curvert.

Lord Curvert looked up apprehensively from his *Times*. "Not another one, I hope."

"Oh, no, Charles. Not another case. I was just thinking that it was very odd that the paper should come out with an editorial on the Teddy boys today. The editor says that juvenile delinquency is getting worse and something must be done to stop it."

"I'll write a letter to the *Times*, my dear," said Lord Curvert.

Fesswick shimmered in through the doorway. "I beg to report, my lord, that Thregonn acknowledges the landing of the capsule. The four have been placed in arrest by the authorities. Their parents have been notified."

"Good," said Lord Curvert. "People here on Earth complain about juvenile delinquency, Fesswick. Just wait until they find out what it's like on a Galactic scale."

THE END

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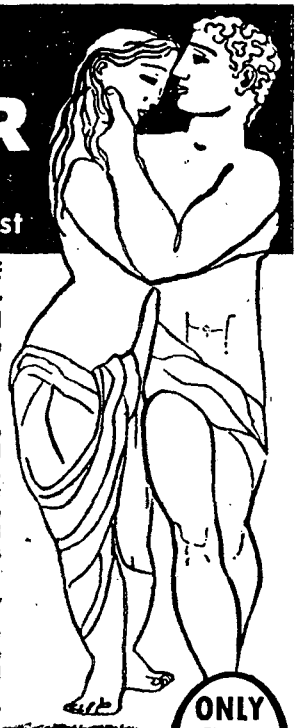

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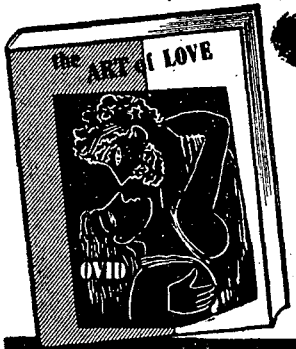

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The HUMAN ZERO

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Illustrator FINLAY

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

UNQUESTIONABLY the most popular mystery story writer in America today is Erle Stanley Gardner. The fabulous popularity sparked by the deductive ingenuity displayed by Perry Mason in solving a crime as he wins a tight courtroom contest has captivated television's viewing millions as completely as his

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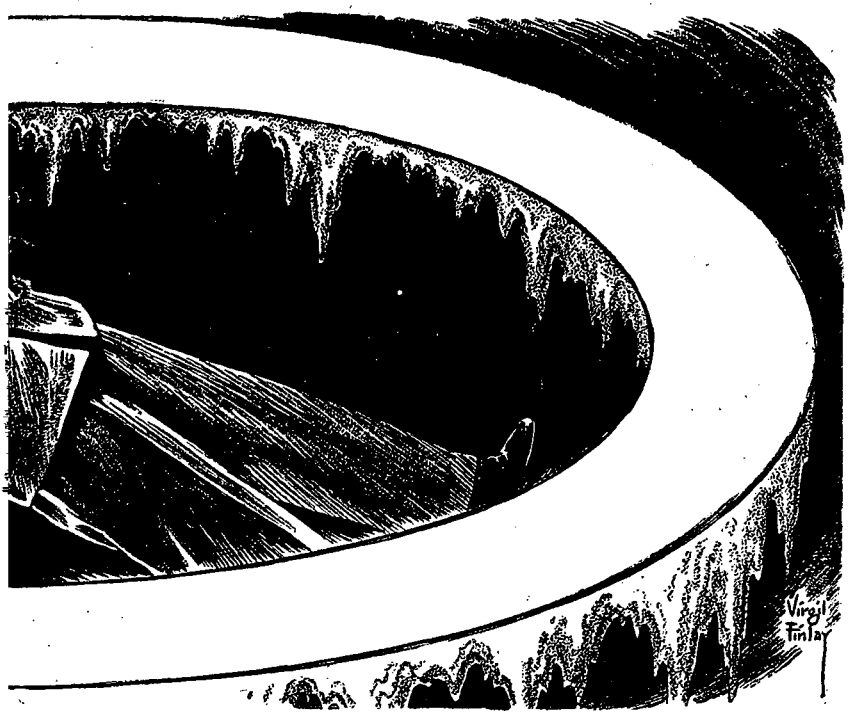

hardbacks and paperbound books command supremacy of the armchair detectives.

The public has come to associate Erle Stanley Gardner so completely with the courtroom mystery, that few are aware that he once was a prolific and skilled producer in a variety of fields including westerns, adventure, air tales, sports, cloak and dagger and, believe it or not, science fiction!

At least half-dozen simon-pure science fiction yarns were contributed by Erle Stanley Gardner to ARGOSY *under his own name and possibly others under pseudonyms. The themes ranged from interplanetary* (The Sky's the Limit) *to time travel* (A Year in a Day) *to the second deluge* (New Worlds). *In selecting a story for reprint we have chosen* The Human Zero *from* ARGOSY, *Dec. 19, 1931, because it is a science fiction theme in a detective story setting. No one will be cheated. Those who pick this story up because they follow Erle Stanley Gardner as a mystery story writer will not be disappointed, nor will those readers who are itching to sample the*

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brand of science fiction manufactured by the renowned author who created Perry Mason.

It is interesting to note that in roughly the same period as the appearance of this story there was a vogue for science fiction themes in a mystery or detective framework. A number of authors, in addition to Erle Stanley Gardner, finding favor with this combination included Murray Leinster with his Darkness on Fifth Avenue *series; Garrett Smith with* You've Killed Privacy *and A. K. Echols with* The Unseen Death.

This type of story is frequent enough to rate mention in A. E. Murch's recent book The Development of the Detective Novel *where he cites it as a peculiarly American development. Fundamentally he is right, though the famed British mystery story writer Edgar Wallace approximated such an effort in his little known* Planetoid 127. *published in 1929. A few years later Edgar Wallace was to cover himself with glory by writing the screenplay of the remarkably successful science fiction thriller* King Kong.

CHAPTER 1

A MYSTERIOUS KIDNAPING

BOB SANDS took the letter from the hands of the captain of police, read it, and pursed his lips in a whistle.

Four pairs of eyes studied the secretary of the kidnaped man as he read. Two pencils scribbled notes on pads of scratch paper, of the type used by newspaper reporters.

Bob Sands showed that he had been aroused from sleep, and had rushed to headquarters. His collar was soiled. His tie was awry. The eyes were still red from rubbing, and his chin was covered with a bristling stubble.

"Good Heavens," he said, "the Old Man was sure given a scare when he wrote that!"

Captain Harder noted the sleep-reddened eyes of the secretary.

"Then it's his writing?"

"Undoubtedly."

Ruby Orman, "sob-sister" writer of the *Clarion*, added to her penciled notes. "Tears streamed down the cheeks of the loyal secretary as he identified the writing as being that of the man by whom he was employed."

Charles Ealy, reporter for the more conservative *Star*, scribbled sketchy notes. "Sands summoned—Identifies writing as being that of P. H. Dangerfield—Dramatic scene enacted in office of Captain Harder at an early hour this morning—Letter, written by kidnaped millionaire, urges police to drop case and bank to pay the half million de-

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manded in cash as ransom—Letter hints at a scientist as being the captor and mentions fate 'so horrible I shudder to contemplate it.' "

SID RODNEY, the other occupant of the room, wrote nothing. He didn't believe in making notes. And, since he was the star detective of a nationally known agency, he was free to do pretty much as he pleased.

Rodney didn't make detailed reports. He got results. He had seen them come and seen them go. Ordinary circumstances found him cool and unexcited. It took something in the nature of a calamity to arouse him.

Now he teetered back on the two legs of his chair and his eyes scanned the faces of the others.

It was three o'clock in the morning. It was the second day following the mysterious abduction of P. H. Dangerfield, a millionaire member of the stock exchange. Demands had been made for a cool half million as ransom. The demands had been okayed by the millionaire, himself, but the bank refused to honor the request. Dangerfield had not over two hundred thousand in his account. The bank was willing to loan the balance, but only when it should be absolutely satisfied that it was the wish of the millionaire, and that the police were powerless.

Rodney was employed by the bank as a special investigator. In addition, the bank had called in the police. The investigation had gone through all routine steps and arrived nowhere. Dangerfield had been at his house. He had vanished. There was no trace of him other than the demands of the kidnapers, and the penciled notations upon the bottom of those letters, purporting to be in the writing of the missing millionaire.

Then had come this last letter, completely written in pen and ink by Dangerfield, himself. It was a letter addressed directly to Captain Harder, who was assuming charge of the case, and implored him to let the bank pay.

Captain Harder turned to Rodney.

"How will the bank take this?" he asked.

Rodney took a deep drag at his cigarette. He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and, as he spoke, the smoke seeped out of the corners of his mouth, clothing the words in a smoky halo.

"Far as the newspapers are concerned," he said, "I have nothing to say. As a private tip, I have an idea the bank will regard this as sufficient authorization, and pay the money."

Captain Harder opened a drawer, took out photostatic copies of the other demands which had been received.

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"They want five hundred thousand dollars in gold certificates, put in a suitcase, sent by the secretary of the kidnaped man, to the alley back of Quong Mow's place in Chinatown. It's to be deposited in an ash can that sits just in front of the back door of Quong Mow's place. Then Sands is to drive away.

"The condition is that the police must not try to shadow Sands or watch the barrel, that Sands must go alone, and that there must be no effort to trace the numbers of the bills. When that has been done, Dangerfield will go free. Otherwise he'll be murdered. The notes point out that, even if the money is deposited in the ash can, but the other conditions are violated, Dangerfield will die."

THERE was silence in the room when the captain finished speaking. All of those present knew the purport of those messages. The newspaper reporters had even gone so far as to photograph the ash can.

There was a knock at the door.

Captain Harder jerked it open.

The man who stood on the threshold of the room, surveying the occupants through clear, gray, emotionless eyes, was Arthur L. Solomon, the president of the bank.

He was freshly shaved, well dressed, cool, collected.

"I obeyed your summons, captain," he said in a dry, husky voice that was as devoid of moisture as a dead leaf scuttling across a cement sidewalk on the wings of a March wind.

Captain Harder grunted.

"*I* came without waiting to shave or change," said Sands, his voice showing a trace of contempt. "They said it was life or death."

The banker's fish-like eyes rested upon the flushed face of Bob Sands.

"I shaved," said Solomon. "I never go out in the morning without shaving. What is the trouble, captain?"

Harder handed over the letter.

The banker took a vacant chair, took spectacles from his pocket, rubbed the lenses with a handkerchief, held them to the light, breathed upon the lenses and polished them again, then finally adjusted the spectacles and read the letter.

His face remained absolutely void of expression.

"Indeed," he said, when he had finished.

"What we want to know," said Captain Harder, "is whether the bank feels it should honor that request, make a loan upon the strength of it and pay that ransom."

The banker put the tips of his fingers together and spoke coldly.

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"One-half a million dollars is a very great deal of money. It is altogether too much to ask by-way of ransom. It would, indeed, be a dangerous precedent for the more prominent business men of this community, were any such ransom to be paid."

"We've been all over that before, Mr. Soloman. What I want to know is what do you want the police to do? If we're to try and find this man, we'd better keep busy. If we're going to sit back and let you ransom him, and then try and catch the kidnapers afterward, we don't want to get our wires crossed."

The banker's tone dripped sarcasm.

"Your efforts so far have seemed to be futile enough. The police system seems inadequate to cope with these criminals."

Captain Harder flushed. "We do the best we can with what we've got. Our salary allowances don't enable us to employ guys that have got the brains of bank presidents to pound our pavements."

Ruby Orman snickered.

The banker's face remained gray and impassive.

"Precisely," he said coldly.

"Nothin' personal," said Harder.

The banker turned to Sid Rodney.

"Has your firm anything to report, Mr. Rodney?"

RODNEY continued to sit back in his chair, his thumbs hooked into the arm holes of his vest, his cigarette hanging at a drooping angle.

"Nothin' that I know of," he said, smoke seeping from his lips with the words.

"Well?" asked Charles Ealy.

Captain Harder looked at the banker meaningly.

"Well?" he said.

Ruby Orman held her pencil poised over her paper.

"The *Clarion* readers will be *so* much interested in your answer, Mr. Soloman."

The banker's mouth tightened.

"The answer," he said, still speaking in the same husky voice, "is *no!*"

The reporters scribbled.

Bob Sands, secretary of the missing man, got to his feet. His manner was belligerent. He seemed to be controlling himself with an effort.

"You admit Mr. Dangerfield could sell enough securities within half an hour of the time he got back on the job to liquidate the entire amount!" he said accusingly.

"I believe he could."

"And this letter is in his handwriting?"

"Yes. I would say it was."

"And he authorizes you to do anything that needs to be done, gives you his power of attorney and all that, doesn't he?"

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"Yes." Soloman nodded.

"Then why not trust his judgment in the matter and do what he says?"

The banker smiled, and the smile was cold- tight-lipped.

"Because the bank is under no obligations to do so. Mr. Dangerfield has a checking account of about two hundred thousand dollars. The bank would honor his check in that amount, provided our attorney could advise us that the information we have received through the press and the police would not be tantamount to knowledge that such check was obtained by duress and menace.

"But as far as loaning any such additional sum to be paid as ransom, the bank does not care to encourage kidnapings by establishing any such precedent. The demand, gentlemen, is unreasonable."

"What," yelled Sands, "has the bank got to say about how much kidnapers demand?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Mr. Sands. Mr. Rodney, I trust your firm will uncover some clue which will be of value. The bank values Mr. Dangerfield's account very much. We are leaving no stone unturned to assist the police. But we cannot subscribe to the payment of such an unheard-of ransom."

"A human life is at stake!" yelled Sands.

The banker paused, his hand on the door, and firmly said:

"The safety of the business world is also at stake, gentlemen. Good morning!"

CHAPTER 2

WHO IS ALBERT CROME?

THE door slammed shut.

Captain Harder sighed.

Sid Rodney tossed away the stub of his cigarette, groped for a fresh one.

"Such is life," mused Charles Ealy.

"The dirty pirate!" snapped Sands. "He's made thousands off of the Dangerfield account. He doesn't care a fig what happens to Dangerfield. He's just afraid of establishing a precedent that will inspire other criminals."

Sid Rodney lit his fresh cigarette.

Ruby Orman's pencil scribbled across the paper.

"Scene one of greatest consternation," she wrote. "Men glanced at each other in an ecstasy of futility. Sands gave the impression of fighting back tears. Even strong men may weep when the life of a friend is at stake. Police promise renewed activity . . ."

Bob Sands reached for his hat.

"I'll go crazy if I hang around here. Is there anything I can do?"

Captain Harder shook his head.

"We'll have this letter gone

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over by the handwriting department," he said.

Sands walked from the room.

"Good morning," he said wearily.

Charles Ealy nodded sympa- captain.

"Nothing new, Harry?"

"Not a thing, other than that letter," said Captain Harder. "This is one case where we can't get a toe-hold to work on."

Charles Ealy nodded sympathetically.

"Anything for publication?" he asked.

"Yes," snapped Captain Harder. "You can state that I am working on a brand new lead, and that within the next twenty-four hours we feel certain we will have the criminals in custody. You may state that we already have a cordon of police guarding against an escape from the city, and that, momentarily, the dragnet is tightening . . . Oh, you folks know, say the usual thing that may put the fear of God into the kidnapers and make the public think we aren't sitting here with arms folded."

Charles Ealy scraped back his chair.

"Wait a minute," said Rodney, the cigarette in his mouth wabbling in a smoky zigzag as he talked. "I may have a hunch that's worth while. Will you give me a break on it, captain, if it's a lead?"

The police captain nodded wearily.

"Shoot," he said.

Rodney grinned at the two reporters.

"This stuff is off the record," he admonished. "You two can scoop it if anything comes of it. Right now it's on the q.t."

The reporters nodded.

They were there, in the first place, because the two papers were "in right" with the administration. And they kept in right with the police department by printing what the police were willing they should print, and by keeping that confidential which was given to them in confidence.

SID RODNEY went to the trouble of removing his cigarette from the corner of his mouth, sure sign of earnestness.

"I've got a funny angle on this thing. I didn't say anything before, because I think it's a whole lot more grave than many people think. I have a hunch we're doing business with a man who has a lot more sense than the average kidnaper. I have a hunch he's dangerous. And if there was any chance of the bank coming to the front, then letting us try to recover the money afterward, I wanted to play it that way.

"But the bank's out, so it's everything to gain and nothing to lose. Now here's the situation. I ran down every one I could find

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who might have a motive. One of the things the agency did, which the police also did, was to run down every one who might profit by the disappearance or death of P. H. Dangerfield.

"But one thing our agency did that the police didn't do, was to try and find out whether or not any person had been trying to interest Dangerfield in a business deal and been turned down.

"We found a dozen leads and ran 'em down. It happened I was to run down a list of three or four, and the fourth person on the list was a chap named Albert Crome. Ever hear of him?"

He paused.

Captain Harder shook his head.

Ruby Orman looked blank. Charles Ealy puckered his brows.

"You mean the scientist that claimed he had some sort of a radium method of disrupting ether waves and forming an etheric screen?"

Rodney nodded. "That's the chap."

"Sort of cuckoo, isn't he? He tried to peddle his invention to the government, but they never took any particular notice of him. Sent a man, I believe, and Crome claimed the man they sent didn't even know elemental physics."

Sid Rodney nodded again.

There was a rap at the door.

Captain Harder frowned, reached back a huge arm, twisted the knob, and opened the door a crack.

"I left orders . . ." He paused in mid-sentence as he saw the face of Bob Sands.

"Oh, come in, Sands. I left orders only five people could come in here, and then I didn't want to be disturbed . . . Lord, man, what's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

Sands nodded.

"Look what happened. I started for home. My roadster was parked out in front of headquarters. I got in and drove it out Claremont Street, and was just turning into Washington when another car came forging alongside of me.

"I thought it would go on past, but it kept crowding me over. Then I thought of all the talk I'd heard of gangsters, and I wondered if there was any chance I was going to be abducted, too.

"I slammed on the brakes. The other car pushed right in beside me. There was a man sitting next to the driver, sort of a foreign looking fellow, and he tossed something.

"I thought it was a bomb, and I yelled and put my hand over my eyes. The thing thudded right into the seat beside me. When I grabbed it to throw it out, I saw it was a leather sack, weighted, and that there was

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crumpled paper on the inside. I opened the sack and found—this!"

Dramatically he handed over the piece of typewritten paper.

"Read it aloud," begged Ealy.

"Take a look," invited Captain Harder, spreading the sheet of paper on the desk.

THEY clustered about in a compact group, read the contents of that single spaced sheet of typewriting.

SANDS:

You are a damned fool. The banker would have given in if you hadn't been so hostile. And the police bungled the affair, as they nearly always do. I've got a method of hearing and seeing what goes on in Captain Harder's office. I'm going to tell you folks right now that you didn't do Dangerfield any good. When I showed him on the screen what was taking place, and he heard your words, he was beside himself with rage.

You've got one more chance to reach that banker. If he doesn't pay the sum within twelve hours there won't be any more Dangerfield.

And the next time I kidnap a man and hold him for ransom I don't want so much powwow about it. Just to show my power, I am going to abduct you, Sands, after I kill Dangerfield, and then I'm going to get Arthur Soloman, the banker. Both of you will be held for a fair ransom. Soloman's ransom will be seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So he'd better get ready to pay.

This is the final and last warning. X.

Captain Harder's eyes were wide.

"Good Lord, has that man got a dictograph running into this office?"

Sands made a helpless gesture with the palms of his hands. He was white, his teeth were chattering, and his knees seemed utterly devoid of strength.

"I don't know. He's a devil. He's always seemed to know just what was going on. And he surely must have known Dangerfield's habits from A to Z. I'm frightened."

Captain Harder walked to the door.

"Send in a couple of men to search this place for a dictograph," he said. Then he turned on his heel, gave a swing of his arm. "Come on in another room, you folks. We'll go into this thing."

The little group trooped into one of the other offices.

"All right, Rodney. You were mentioning a scientist. What of him?"

"I went to his office," said Rodney, "and tried to engage him in conversation. He wouldn't talk. I asked him what he knew about Dangerfield, and he all but frothed at the mouth. He said Dangerfield was a crook, a pirate, a robber. Then he slammed the door.

"But, here's the point. I got a peep at the inside of his office.

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There was a Royal portable in there, and these letters that were received demanding ransom were written on a Royal portable.

"It's not much of a lead, and it's one that the police will have to run down—now. If it's a matter of life and death, and working against time, then it's too big for our agency to handle. But my opinion is that Albert Crome was violently insane, at least upon the subject of Dangerfield."

The police captain whirled to Sands.

"What sort of a car were these men using?"

"You mean the men who tossed the letter?"

"Yes."

"I can't tell you. I know it's stupid of me, but I just got too rattled to notice. It was a big car, and it looked as though it might have been a Cadillac, or a Buick, or a Packard. It might even have been some other make."

The captain snorted.

"What do you know about Crome?"

Sands blinked.

"I know Mr. Dangerfield was negotiating for the purchase of some patent rights, or the financing of some formula or something, but that's about all. The deal fell through."

"Ever meet Crome?"

The secretary hesitated, knitted his brows.

"You'll have to let me think . . . Yes, yes, of course I did. I met him several times. Some of the negotiations were carried on through me."

"Impress you as being a little off?" asked Sid Rodney, drawling the question, his inevitable cigarette dangling loosely from the corner of his mouth as he talked.

"No. He impressed me as being a pretty wide awake sort of a chap, very much of a gentleman, with a high sense of honor."

CAPTAIN HARDER pressed a button.

"Take these letters. Have 'em photographed," he told the man who answered the buzzer. "Check the typewriting with the others. Then get me everything you can get on Albert Crome. I want to know what he's been doing with his time the last few days, who he associates with, who's seen him lately, where he lives, what he's doing with his work, everything about him.

"And if you can get a man into his offices and laboratory, I want a specimen of the typewriting that comes from the portable machine he's got—a Royal."

The man nodded, withdrew.

Captain Harder grinned at the little group.

"Well, we might go down to T-Bone Frank's and have a cup of coffee and some eats. Maybe

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we'll have something new when we get back."

Sands fidgeted.

"I don't want anything to eat."

"Well, you'd better wait a little while, Sands. You know that threat may mean nothing. Then again, it may mean a lot."

Sands nodded.

"Are you going to tell Soloman?"

"Yes. I'll give him a ring, I guess. Maybe I'd better do it before he gets home and to bed. Let's see, I've got his number here. I'll give him a buzz and break the glad tidings and then put a couple of the boys on guard in front of the place. It'll make him think a little. Didn't like his attitude, myself . . . Oh, well!"

He gave the exchange operator the number, replaced the receiver, fished a cigar from his pocket and scraped a noisy match along the sole of his shoe.

Ruby Orman scribbled on her pad of paper: "In tense silence, these men waited grimly for the dawn."

Charles Ealy put a matter-of-fact question.

"Can we get these letters for the noon editions, Harry?"

"What's deadline?" asked the captain.

"We'd have to have them by eight o'clock in order to get the plates ready."

"I guess so. It ain't eight o'clock yet."

Ealy perked up his ears.

"You speak as though you had something up your sleeve," he said.

The officer nodded grimly.

"I have," he said.

The telephone rang. Captain Harder cupped his ear to the receiver.

"Funny," he said, "Soloman's residence says he's not home yet." Then: "Keep calling. Tell him I want to speak to him. It's important."

They went to the all-night restaurant, lingered over coffee and sandwiches. They were all nervous, with the exception of Sid Rodney. That individual seemed to be utterly relaxed, but it was the inactivity of a cat who is sprawled in the sun, keeping a lazy eye upon a fluttering bird, trying to locate the nest.

Charles Ealy watched Sid Rodney narrowly. Once he nodded, slowly.

They finished their meal, returned to headquarters.

HEARD from Soloman?" asked Captain Harder.

Sergéant Green, at the desk, shook his head.

"They keep saying he hasn't returned. But we've unearthed some stuff about Crome from our department files. He wanted a permit to establish an experi-

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menting station in a loft building down town. Had the lease on the place and was all ready to go ahead when he found out he had to have a permit to operate the sort of a place he wanted.

"He was turned down on the permit after it appeared that his experiments were likely to increase the fire hazard, and he was bitter about it."

Captain Harder grunted.

"That doesn't help much."

"Did he send in any typewritten letters?" asked Sid Rodney.

"Maybe. I'll look in the files. Most of those things would be in another file."

"Got the address of the loft building?"

"Yes—632 Grant Street. That's down near the wholesale district, a little side street."

Sid nodded.

"Yeah. I know. What say we take a run down there, captain?"

"Why? He was turned down on his permit. There's nothing there for us."

Rodney lit a fresh cigarette and resumed.

"The man's a scientist. He hates Dangerfield. He impresses me as being very much unbalanced. He's got a loft that isn't being used. Now *if* he should happen to be mixed up in the kidnaping, where would be a better place to keep a prisoner than in an unused loft building, that had been taken over and fitted up as an experimental laboratory?"

Captain Harder grinned.

"You win," he said. "Get me half a dozen of the boys out, sergeant. I'm going down there myself and give it a once over. Better take along a bunch of keys."

DO we go along?" asked Ealy, his eyes twinkling.

Captain Harder grinned.

"Certainly not," he said.

Sands took him seriously.

"I'm glad of that. I'm simply all in. I want to go and get some sleep, a bath and a shave."

Captain Harder looked sympathetic.

"I know, Sands. Ealy and I were kidding. But if you feel all in, go on home and get some sleep. We've got your number. We'll call you if there's anything there."

"How about an escort?" asked Rodney. "Those threats, you know . . ."

Sands vehemently shook his head.

"No. I don't want to advertise to the neighborhood that I'm afraid. I'll go on home and sleep. I'm safe for twelve hours yet, anyway. If you think there's any danger at the end of that time, I'll move into a hotel and you can give me a guard."

Captain Harder nodded in agreement.

"Okay."

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CHAPTER 3
INTO THIN AIR

THE two police cars slid smoothly to the curb before the loft building.

The first streaks of dawn were tingeing the buildings in the concrete cañon of loft buildings, wholesale houses and nondescript apartments.

Captain Harder jerked his thumb.

"This is the place. No use standin' on formality. Let's go up. He had the whole building leased. Looks vacant now."

The men moved across the echoing sidewalk in a compact group. There was the jingle of keys against the brass lock plate, and then the click of a bolt. The door opened. A flight of stairs, an automatic elevator, a small lobby, showed in the reddish light of early morning. There was a musty smell about the place.

"Take the elevator," said Captain Harder. "Then we won't have so much trouble . . . funny he leased the whole building in advance of a permit. This lease cost him money."

No one said anything. They opened the door of the elevator. Then they drew back with an exclamation.

"Look there!" said one of the men.

There was a stool in the elevator. Upon that stool was a tray, and upon the tray was some food, remnants of sandwiches, a cup of coffee, the sides stained where trickles of the liquid had slopped over the side of the cup.

Captain Harder smelled the cup, jabbed a finger into the crust of the sandwiches.

"Looks like it's less than twenty-four hours old," he said.

The men examined the tray.

Captain Harder snapped into swift activity. It was plainly apparent that the curiosity which had sent him down to the loft building for a "look around" merely because there were no other clues to run down, had given place to well-defined suspicion.

"Here, Bill. You take one of the boys with you and watch the steps. Frank, get out your gun and watch the fire escape. Go around the back way, through the alley. We'll keep quiet and give you three minutes to get stationed. Then we're going up.

"If you see any one, order him to stop. If he doesn't obey, shoot to kill. George, you go with Frank. The rest of us are going up in the elevator."

He took out his watch.

"Three minutes," he said.

The men snapped into action.

Captain Harder held a thumb nail upon the dial of his big watch, marking the time.

"Okay," he said, at length. "Let's go. You two birds on the

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stairs, make sure you don't get above the first floor without covering every inch of ground you pass. We don't want any one to duck out on us. If you hear any commotion, don't come unless I blow my whistle. Watch those stairs!"

HE closed the door of the elevator, jabbed the button marked by the figure "1."

The elevator creaked and swayed upward at a snail's pace, came to the first floor and stopped. Captain Harder propped the door open, emerged into a hallway, found himself facing two doors.

Both were unlocked. He opened first one, and then the other.

There were disclosed two empty lofts, littered with papers and rubbish. They were bare of furniture, untenanted. Even the closet doors were open, and they could see into the interiors of them.

"Nothing doing," said the officer. "Guess it's a false alarm, but we'll go on up."

They returned to the elevator, pressed the next button.

There were three floors, narrow, but deep.

The second floor was like the first as far as the doors were concerned. But as soon as Captain Harder opened the first door, it was at once apparent they were on a warm trail.

The place was fitted up with benches, with a few glass jars, test tubes, some rather complicated apparatus enclosed in a glass case. There were a few jars of chemical, and there were some more trays with food remnants upon them.

"Somebody," said Captain Harder grimly, making sure his service revolver was loose in its holster, "is living here. Wonder what's in that room on the corner. Door looks solid enough."

He pushed his way forward through the litter on the floor, twisted the knob of the door.

"Locked," he said, "and feels solid as stone."

And, at that moment, sounding weak and faint, as though coming from a great distance, came a cry, seeping through the door from the room beyond, giving some inkling of the thickness of the door.

"Help, help, help! This is Paul Dangerfield. Help me! Help me!"

Captain Harder threw his weight against the door. As well have thrown his weight against the solid masonry of a wall.

"Hello," he called. "Are you safe, Dangerfield? This is the police!"

The men could hear the sound of frantic blows on the opposite side of the door.

"Thank God! Quick, get me out of here. Smash in the door. It's a foot thick!"

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THE words were faint, muffled. The blows which sounded upon the other side of the door gave evidence of the thickness and strength of the mortal.

Captain Harder turned to one of the men.

"How about keys?"

"I've got 'em, captain, but where do we put 'em?"

The officer stepped back to look at the door.

There was not a sign of a lock or keyhole in it. There was a massive knob, but nothing else to show that the door differed from the side of the wall, save the hairline of its borders.

"Smash it in! All together!"

They flung themselves against the door.

Their efforts were utterly unavailing.

"Hurry, hurry!" yelled the voice on the other side of the door. "He's going to . . . No, no! Don't. Oh! Go away! Don't touch that door. Oh . . . Oh . . . Not that!"

The voice rose to a piercing wail of terror, and then was silent. The squad pounded on the door, received no answer.

Captain Harder whirled to examine the loft.

"There's a bar over there. Let's get this door down."

He raised the whistle to his lips, blew a shrill blast. The two men who had been guarding the stairs came up on the run.

"Get this door down!" snapped the police captain, "and let's make it snappy."

They held a block of wood so that it formed a fulcrum for the bar, inserted the curved end, started to pry. The door was as solid as though it had been an integral part of the wall. Slowly, however the men managed to get the bar inserted to a point where the leverage started to spring the bolts.

Yet it was a matter of minutes, during which time there was no sound whatever from that mysterious inner room.

At length the door swayed, creaked, pried unevenly, sprung closed as the men shifted their grips on the bar to get a fresh purchase.

"Now, then, boys!" said Captain Harder, perspiration streaming down from his forehead and into his eyes. "Let's go!"

They flung themselves into the work. The door tottered, creaked, slowly pried loose and then banged open.

The squad stared at a room built without windows. There was ventilation which came through a grating in the roof. This grating was barred with inch-thick iron bars. The air sucked out through one section, came blowing through another. The air seemed fresh enough, yet there was an odor in that room

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which was a stale stench of death. It was the peculiar, sickeningly sweet odor which hangs about a house which has been touched by death.

There was a table, a reclining chair, a carpet, a tray of food, a bed. The room gave evidence of having been lived in.

But it was vacant, so far as any living thing was concerned.

On the floor, near the door which had been forced, was a pile of clothing. The clothing was sprawled out as though it had covered the form of a man who had toppled backward to the door, stretched his full length upon the floor, and then been withdrawn from his garments.

CAPTAIN HARDER bent to an examination of the garments. There was a watch in the pocket which had stopped. The stopping of the watch was exactly five minutes before, at about the time the officers had begun pounding at the door.

There was a suit of silk underwear inside of the outer garments. The tie was neatly knotted about the empty collar. The sleeves of the shirt were down inside the sleeves of the coat. There were socks which nested down inside the shoes, as though thrust there by some invisible foot.

There was no word spoken.

Those officers, reporters, detectives, hardened by years of experience, to behold the gruesome, stared speechlessly at that vacant bundle of clothing.

Charles Ealy was the one who broke the silence.

"Good Heavens! There's been a man in these clothes and he's been sucked out, like a bit of dirt being sucked up into a vacuum cleaner!"

Captain Harder regained control of himself with an effort. His skin was still damp with perspiration, but that perspiration had cooled until it presented an oily slime which accentuated the glistening pallor of his skin.

"It's a trap, boys. It's a damned clever trap, but it's just a trap. There couldn't have been . . ."

He didn't finish, for Ruby Orman, speaking in a hushed voice, pointed to one of the shoes.

"Try," she said, "just try fitting a sock into the toe of that shoes the way this one is fitted, and try doing it while the shoe's laced, or do it, and then lace the shoe afterward, and see where you get."

"Humph," said Ealy, "as far as that's concerned, try getting a necktie around the collar of a shirt and then fitting a coat and vest around the shirt."

Captain Harder cleared his throat and addressed them all.

"Now listen, you guys, you're actin' like a bunch of kids. Even

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supposing there was some one in this room, where could he have gone? There ain't any opening. He couldn't have slid through those bars in the ventilator."

Some of the detectives nodded sagely, but it remained for Rodney to ask the question which left them baffled.

"How," he asked, "was it possible to get the foot out of that laced shoe?"

Captain Harder turned away.

"Let's not get stampeded," he said.

He started to look around him.

"Cooked food's been brought in here at regular intervals . . . the man that was here was Dangerfield, all right. Those are his clothes. There's the mark of the tailor, and there's his gold-scrolled fountain pen. His watch has his initials on, even his check book is in the pocket.

"I tell you, boys, we're on the right track. This is the place Dangerfield's been kept, and it's that inventor who's at the bottom of the whole thing. We'll go knock his place over, and we'll probably find where Dangerfield is right now. He was spirited away from here, somehow.

"Those clothes were left here for a blind. Don't get stampeded. Here, feel the inside of the cloth. It's plumb cold, awfully cold. If anybody'd been inside those clothes within five minutes, the clothes'd be warm."

One of the officers nodded. His face gave an exhibition of sudden relief which was almost ludicrous. He grinned shamefacedly.

"By George, captain, that's so! Do you know, for a minute, this thing had me goofy. But you can see how cool the clothes are, and this watch is like a chunk of ice. It'd be warm if anybody had been inside those clothes."

"Who," asked Sid Rodney, "was it that was calling to us through the door?"

Captain Harder stepped to the door, dragged in the bar.

"I don't know. It may have been a trick of ventriloquism, or it may have been a sound that was projected through the ventilating system. But, anyhow, I'm going to find out. If there's a secret entrance to this room, I'm going to find it if I have to rip off every board of the walls one at a time."

HE started with the bar, biting it into the tongue and groove which walled the sides of the room. Almost instantly the ripping bar disclosed the unique construction of that room.

It consisted of tongue and groove, back of which was a layer of thick insulation that looked like asbestos. Back of that was a layer of thick steel, and the steel seemed to be backed with concrete, so solid was it.

By examining the outside of

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the room, they were able to judge the depth of the walls. They seemed to be at least three feet thick. The room was a veritable sound-proof chamber.

Evidently the door was operated by some electro-magnetic control. There were thick bars which went from the interior of the door down into sockets built in the floor, steel faced, bedded in concrete.

Captain Harder whistled.

"Looks like there was no secret exit there. It must have been some sort of ventriloquism."

Sid Rodney grunted.

"Well, it wasn't ventriloquism that made the jars on that door. It was some one pounding and kicking on the other side. And, if you'll notice the toes of those shoes, you'll see where there are fragments of wood splinters, little flakes of paint, adhering to the soles right where they point out into the uppers.

"Now, then, if you'll take the trouble to look at the door, you'll find little marks in the wood which correspond to the marks on the toes of the shoes. In other words, whether those shoes were occupied or not, they were hammering against that door a few minutes ago."

Captain Harder shook his head impatiently.

"The trouble with all that reasoning is that it leads into impossibilities."

Sid Rodney stooped to the vest pocket, looked once more at the gold embossed fountain pen.

"Has any one tried this to see if it writes?" he asked.

"What difference would that make?" asked the police captain.

"He might have left us a message," said Sid.

He abstracted the pen, removed the cap, tried the end of the pen upon his thumb nail. Then he took a sheet of paper from his notebook, tried the pen again.

"Listen, you guys, all this stuff isn't getting us anywhere. The facts are that Dangerfield was here. He ain't here now. Albert Crome has this place rented. He has a grudge against Dangerfield. It's an odds-on bet that we're going to get the whole fiendish scheme out of him—if we get there soon enough."

There was a mutter of affirmation from the officers, ever men who were more accustomed to rely upon direct action and swift accusation than upon the slower method of deduction.

WAIT a minute," said Sid Rodney. His eyes were flaming with the fire of an inner excitement. He unscrewed the portion of the pen which contained the tip, from the barrel, drew out the long rubber tube which held the ink.

Captain Harder regarded him

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with interest, but with impatience.

"Just like any ordinary self-filling pen the world over," said the police captain.

Sid Rodney made no comment. He took a knife from his pocket, slit open the rubber sac. A few sluggish drops of black liquid trickled slowly down his thumb, then he pulled out a jet black rod of solid material.

He was breathing rapidly now, and the men, attracted by the fierce earnestness of his manner, crowded about him.

"What is it?" asked one.

Rodney did not answer the question directly. He broke the thing in half, peered at the ends.

These ends glistened like some polished, black jewel which had been broken open. The light reflected from little tiny points, giving an odd appearance of sheen and luster.

Slowly a black stain spread along the palm of the detective's hand.

Sid Rodney set the long rod of black, broken into two pieces, down upon the tray of food.

"Is that ink?" demanded Harder.

"Yes."

"What makes it look so funny?"

"It's frozen."

"Frozen!"

"Yes."

"But how could ink be frozen in a room of this sort? The room isn't cold."

Sid Rodney shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not advancing any theories—yet. I'm simply remarking that it's frozen ink. You'll notice that the rubber covering and the air which was in the barrel of the pen acted as something of a thermal insulation. Therefore, it was slower to thaw out than some things."

Captain Harder stared at Rodney with a puckered forehead and puzzled eyes.

"What things do you mean?"

"The watch, for instance. You notice that it's started to run again."

"By George, it has!" said Charles Ealy. "It's started ticking right along just as though nothing had happened, but it's about six and a half or seven minutes slow."

Sid nodded silent affirmation.

Captain Harder snorted.

"You birds can run all the clues that you want to. I'm going to get a confession out of the bird that's responsible for this.

"Two of you stay here and see that no one comes in or goes out. Guard this place. Shoot to kill any one who disobeys your orders. This thing is serious, and there's murder at the bottom of it, or I miss my guess."

He whirled and stamped from the room, walking with that ag-

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gressive swing of the shoulders, that forward thrust of his sturdy legs, which betokened no good for the crack-brained scientist.

CHAPTER 4

A MADMAN'S LABORATORY

THEY hammered on the door. After a matter of minutes there was an answer, a thin, cracked voice which echoed through the thick partitions of a door which seemed every bit as substantial as the door which Captain Harder had forced in order to enter that curious room where an empty suit of clothes had mocked him.

"Who is it?"

Captain Harder tried a subterfuge.

"Captain Harder, come to see about the purchase of an invention. I'm representing the War Department."

The man on the other side of that door crackled into a cackling chuckle. "It's about time. Let's have a look at you."

Captain Harder nodded to the squad of grim-visaged men who were grouped just back of him.

"All ready, boys," he said.

They lowered their shoulders, ready to rush the door as soon as it should be opened.

But, to their surprise, there was a slight scraping noise, and a man's face peered malevolently at them from a rectangular slit in the door.

Captain Harder jerked back.

The face was only partially visible through the narrow peephole. But there was a section of wrinkled forehead, shaggy, unkempt eyebrows, the bridge of a bony nose, and two eyes.

The eyes compelled interest. They were red rimmed. They seemed to be perpetually irritated, until the irritation had seeped into the brain itself. And they glittered with a feverish light of unwholesome cunning.

"Psh! The police!" said the voice, sounding startlingly clear through the opening of the door.

"Open in the name of the law!" snapped Captain Harder.

"Psh!" said the man again.

There was the faintest flicker of motion from behind the little peephole in the door, and a sudden coughing explosion. A little cloud of white smoke mushroomed slowly out from the corner of the opening.

The panel slid into place with the smooth efficiency of a well oiled piece of machinery.

Captain Harder jerked out his service revolver.

"All together, boys. Take that door down!"

He gathered himself, then coughed, flung up his hand to his eyes.

"Gas!" he yelled. "Look out!"

The warning came too late for most of the squad of officers who were grouped about that door.

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The tear gas, a new and deadly kind which seemed so volatile as to make it mix instantly with the atmosphere, spread through the corridor. Men were blinded, staggering about, groping their way, crashing into one another.

The panel in the door slid back again. The leering, malevolent features twisted into a hoarse laugh.

Captain Harder flung up his revolver and fired at the sound of that demoniac laughter.

The bullet thudded into the door.

The panel slid shut.

Sid Rodney had flung his arm about the waist of Ruby Orman at the first faint suggestion of mushrooming fumes.

"Back! It may be deadly!"

She fought against him.

"Let me go! I've got to cover this!"

But he swept her from her feet, flung her to his shoulder, sprinted down the hallways of the house. A servant gazed at them from a lower floor, scowling. Men were running, shouting questions at each other, stamping up and down stairs. The entire atmosphere of the house took on a peculiarly acrid odor.

SID RODNEY got the girl to an upper window on the windward side of the house. Fresh air was blowing in in a cooling stream.

"Did it get your eyes?"

"No. I'm going back."

Sid held her.

"Don't be foolish. There's going to be something doing around here, and you and I have got to have our eyes where they can see something."

She fought against him.

"Oh, I *hate* you! You're so domineering, so cocksure of yourself."

Abruptly, he let her go.

"If you feel that way," he said, "go ahead."

She jerked back and away. She looked at him with eyes that were flaming with emotion. Sid Rodney turned back toward the window. Her eyes softened in expression, but there was a flaming spot in each cheek.

"Why *will* you persist in treating me like a child?"

He made no effort to answer the question.

She turned back toward the end of the hallway, where the scientist had maintaind his secret laboratory with the door that held the sliding panel.

Men were struggling blindly about that door. Others were wrapping their eyes in wet towels. Here and there a figure groped its way about the corridor, clutching at the sides of the banister at the head of the stairs, feeling of the edges of the walls.

Suddenly, the entire vision swam before her eyes, grew

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blurred. She felt something warm trickling down her cheek. Abruptly her vision left her. Her eyes streamed moisture.

"Sid!" she called. "Oh, Sid!"

He was at her side in an instant. She felt the strong tendons of his arm, the supporting bulk of his shoulder, and then she was swung toward the window where the fresh air streamed into the house.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Now it's got me."

"It probably won't bother you very long. You didn't get much of a dose of it. Hold your eyes open if you can, and face the breeze. They'll have the house cleared of the fumes in a few minutes."

There was the sound of a siren from the outer street, the clang of a gong.

"Firemen to clear the house," said Sid.

They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, cheek to cheek, letting the fresh morning breeze fan their faces. Out in the yard were hurrying shadows. Men came running to stations of vantage, carrying sawed-off shotguns. More cars sirened their way to the curb. Spectators gathered.

Electric fans were used to clear the corridor of the gas. Men were brought up carrying bars and jimmies. They attacked the door. Captain Harder's eyes were still disabled, as were the eyes of the others who had stood before that door.

Sid Rodney touched the girl's shoulder.

"They're getting ready to smash in the door. Can you see now?"

She nodded.

"I think they've got the hallway pretty well cleared of gas. Let's go and see what happens."

She patted his arm.

"Sid, you're just like a big brother—some one to take care of me, some one to scold; but I like you a lot."

"Just as you would a brother?" he asked.

"Just exactly."

"Thanks," he said, and the disappointment of his voice was lost in the sound of splintering wood as the door swung back on its hinges.

THEY stared into a great laboratory and experimenting room. It was a scene of havoc. Wreckage of bottles, equipment and apparatus was strewn about the room. It looked as though some one had taken an ax and ruthlessly smashed everything.

Here, too, was another room without windows. Such light as there was in the room was artificial. The ventilation came through grilles which were barred with heavy iron. It was a room upon which it was impossible to spy.

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There was no trace of Albert Crome, the man whose malevolent face had been thrust through the aperture in the doorway.

The police crowded into the room.

BOTTLES of various acids had been smashed, and the pools upon the floor seethed and bubbled, gave forth acrid, throat-stinging fumes. In a cage by the door there were three white rats. These rats were scampering about, shrilling squeaky protests.

There was no other sign of life left in that room, save the hulking shoulders of the policemen who moved about in a dazed manner.

Captain Harder's voice bellowed instructions. He was blinded, but he was receiving reports from a detective who stood at his side and giving a rapid summary of conditions in the room.

"He's escaped some way. There's a secret passage out of this room. Get the guards about the place to establish a dead-line. Let no man through unless he has a pass signed by me. Those instructions are not to be varied or changed under any circumstances . . ."

A man approached the officer.

"You're wanted on the telephone, captain. I can plug in an extension here in the laboratory."

A servant, surly-faced, resentful, impassively placed a telephone extension in the hand of Captain Harder, plugged in the wires.

The blinded officer raised the receiver to his ear.

"Yeah?" he said.

There came a rasping series of raucous notes, then the shrill cackle of metallic laughter and the click which announced the party at the other end of the line had hung up.

Captain Harder started fiddling with the hook of the receiver in a frantic effort to get central.

"Hello, hello. This is Captain Harder. There was a call just came through to me on this line. Trace it. Try and locate it . . . What's that? No call? He said he was calling from a down town drug store . . . All right."

The captain hung up the receiver.

"Well, boys, I guess he's given us the slip. That was his voice, all right. He was calling from a down town drug store, he said. Told me to look in the northeast corner of the room and I'd find a secret passage leading down into his garage. Said he ran right out in his car without any trouble at all. He's laughing at us."

One of the men picked his way through the wreckage of the room to the northeast corner. The others shuffled forward.

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Broken glass crunched under the soles of their feet as they moved.

CHAPTER 5
A FANTASTIC SECRET

THE man who was bending over the wainscoting emitted a triumphant shout.

"Here it is!"

He gave a pull, and a section of the wall slid back, disclosing an oblong opening.

Captain Harder was cursing as a detective led him toward this oblong.

"I'm blinded . . . the outer guard let him slip through! What sort of boobs are we, anyhow? I thought I had this place guarded. Who was watching the outside? Herman, wasn't it? Get me that guy. I've got things to say to him!"

Men went down the steep flight of stairs which led from that secret exit, and came to the garage. Here were several cars, neatly lined up, ready for instant use, also several vacant spaces where additional cars could be kept.

"Big enough!" grunted one of the men.

Sid Rodney had an idea.

"Look here, captain, it took time to smash up that laboratory."

Captain Harder was in no mood for theories.

"Not so much! What if it did?"

"Nothing. Only it took some little time. I don't believe a man could have looked out of the door, recognized the police, turned loose the tear gas, and then smashed up this laboratory and still have time enough to make his escape by automobile from the garage.

"I happened to be looking out of a window after that tear gas was released, and I saw your additional guards start to arrive . . ."

Captain Harder interrupted. He was bellowing like a bull.

"What a bunch of boobs we are!" he yelled at the men who had clustered around him in a circle. "He didn't get away at all. He stayed behind to smash up the laboratory! Then he sneaked out and telephoned me from some place in the house. No wonder central couldn't trace the call.

"Look around, you guys, for another exit from this laboratory. And keep those electric fans going. I don't trust this bird. He's likely to flood a lot of poison gas through that ventilating system of his . . . I'm commencing to get so I can see a little bit. Be all right in a few minutes, I hope."

The men scattered, examining the wainscoting.

"Here we are, captain!" called one of the men. "Take a look at this. Something here, right enough, but I can't just figure

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how it works. . . Wait a minute. That's it!"

Something clicked as the officer stepped back. A section of the wainscoting swung open, revealing a passage the height of a man crawling on all fours.

"Volunteers," said Captain Harder. "Damn these eyes! I'm going myself."

And he approached the passageway.

There was a stabbing burst of flame, the rattle of a machine gun, and a withering hail of bullets vomited from out of the passageway.

Captain Harder staggered backward, his right arm dangling at his side. The man who had been next to him dropped to the floor, and it needed no second glance to tell that the man was dead, even before he hit the floor.

The walls of the laboratory echoed to the crash of gunfire. Policemen, flinging themselves upon the floor, fired into the yawning darkness of that oblong hole in the wall. Here and there, riot guns belched their buckshot into the passageway.

There was the sound of the mocking laughter, another spurt of machine gun fire, then silence.

CAPTAIN HARDER had his coat off, was groping with his left hand for the location of the two bullet holes in his right arm and shoulder.

"Reckon I'm going to be an ambulance case, boys. Don't risk anything in there. Try gas."

The captain turned, groped for the door, staggered, fell. Blood spurted from the upper wound, which had evidently severed an artery.

Men grabbed him, carried him to the head of the stairs where ambulance men met them with a stretcher. Officers continued to keep up a fire upon the passageway. A man brought in a basket containing hand grenades and tear gas bombs. The pin was pulled from a tear gas bomb. The hissing of the escaping gas sounded plainly while the men on the floor held their fire.

The man who carried the gas bomb ran along the side of the wainscoting, flung the bomb into the opening. It hit with a thud, rolled over and over.

There was no sound emanating from the passageway, save the faint hiss of the gas.

"Give him a dose of it and see how he likes it," said one of the men.

As though to answer his question, from the very vicinity of the tear gas bomb, came a glittering succession of ruddy flashes, the rattle of a machine gun.

One of the men who was on the floor gave a convulsive leap, then quivered and was still. A hail of bullets splintered through the glass equipment which had been

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broken and scattered about. An officer tried to roll out of the way. The stream of bullets overtook him. He jumped, twitched, shivered, and the deadly stream passed on.

Sid Rodney grasped a hand grenade from the basket, pulled the pin, jumped to his feet.

The machine gun whirled in his direction.

"He's got a gas mask!" yelled one of the men who was crouched behind the shelter of an overturned bench.

Sid Rodney threw the grenade with all of the hurtling force of a professional baseball pitcher.

The missile hit squarely in the center of the opening, thudded against something that emitted a yell of pain.

The machine gun became silent, then stuttered into another burst of firing.

A livid sheet of orange flame seared its way out into the room. The whole side of the place seemed to lift, then settle. A deafening report ripped out the glass of windows in one side of the house. Plaster dust sprayed the air.

The oblong hole from which the machine gun had been coughing its message of death vanished into a tumbled mass of wreckage.

Men coughed from the acrid powder fumes, the irritating plaster dust.

"Believe that got him," said one of the men, rolling out from the shelter, holding a riot gun at ready as he rushed toward the tumbled mass of wreckage.

A human foot was protruding from between a couple of splintered two-by-fours. About it eddied wisps of smoke.

The officer was pined by others. Hands pulled the rafters and studs to one side. The body of a mangled man came sliding out.

From the blackness of that hole came the orange flicker of ruddy flame, the first faint cracklings of fire.

The mangled body had on what was left of a gas mask. The torso was torn by the force of the explosion. Parts of a machine gun were buried in the quivering flesh. But the features could be recognized.

Albert Crome, the crackbrained scientist, had gone to his doom.

MEN rushed up with fire-fighting apparatus. The flames were swiftly extinguished. The wreckage was cleared away. Men crawled into that little cubicle where the scientist had prepared a place of refuge.

It was a little room, steel-lined, fitted with a desk, a table and a cot. Also there was a telephone extension in the room, and an electrical transformer, wires from which ran to a box-like af-

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fair, from the interior of which came a peculiar humming sound.

"Leave it alone until the bombing squad gets here. They'll know if it's some sort of an infernal machine. In the meantime let's get out of here."

The sergeant who gave the orders started pushing the men back.

Even as he spoke, there was a glow of ruddy red light from the interior of the box-like affair into which the electric wires ran.

"Better disconnect those wires," called one of the men.

The sergeant nodded, stepped forward, located the point of contact, reached to jerk one of the wires loose.

"Look out, don't short circuit 'em!"

Sid Rodney had crawled back out of the passage. The sergeant was tugging at the wires. They came loose, touched. There was a flash from the interior of the box-like machine, a humming, and then a burst of flame that died away and left a dense white smoke trailing out in sizzling clouds.

"You've short circuited the thing. That other wire must have been a ground and a button . . ."

But Sid Rodney was not listening.

His eyes happened to have been upon the cage of white rats as the voice called its warning. Those rats were scampering about the cage in the hysteria of panic.

Abruptly they ceased all motion, stood for a split fraction of a second as though they had been cast in porcelain. Then they shrank upon themselves.

Sid Rodney screamed a warning.

Men looked at him, followed the direction of his pointing forefinger, and saw an empty cage.

"What is it?" asked a detective.

Sid Rodney's face was white, the eyes bulging.

"The rats!"

"They got away. Somebody turned 'em loose, or the explosion knocked the cage around or blew a door open," said the officer. "Don't worry about them."

"No, no. I saw them melt and disappear. They just dissolved into the atmosphere."

The officer snickered.

"Don't bother yourself about rats," he said. "We've got work to do. Gotta find out what's going on here, and we've gotta locate Dangerfield."

He turned away.

Sid Rodney went over to the cage. He grasped the metal wires. They were so cold to his touch that the slight moisture on the tips of his fingers stuck to them.

He jerked one hand, and a bit

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of skin from the tips of his fingers pulled away.

He noticed a little pan of water which had been in the cage. It was filmed with ice. He touched the wires of the cage again. They were not so cold this time.

The film of ice was dissolving from the pan of water in the cage.

But there were no more white rats. They had disappeared, gone, utterly vanished.

SID RODNEY examined the cage. The door was tightly closed, held in place with a catch. There was no possible loophole of escape for those white rats. They had been caged, and the cage held them until, suddenly, they had gone into thin air.

There was a touch on his shoulder.

"What is it, Sid?"

Sid Rodney had to lick his dry lips before he dared to trust his voice.

"Look here, Ruby, did you ever hear of absolute zero?"

She looked at him with a puzzled frown, eyes that were dark with concern.

"Sid, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, yes! I'm talking about things scientific. Did you ever hear of absolute zero?"

She nodded.

"Yes, of course. I remember we had it in school. It's the point at which there is absolutely no temperature. Negative two hundred and seventy-three degrees centigrade, isn't it? Seems to me I had to remember a lot of stuff about it at one time. But what has it got to do with what's been going on here?"

"A lot," said Sid Rodney. "Listen to this:

"Dangerfield disappears. He's located in a room. There's no such thing as escape from that room. Yet, before our eyes—or, rather, before our ears—he vanishes. His watch is stopped. The ink in his fountain pen is frozen. His clothes remain behind.

"All right, that's an item for us to remember.

"Then next come these white rats. I'm actually looking at them when they cease to move, dwindle in size and are gone, as though they'd been simply snuffed out of existence.

"Now you can see the ice film still on the water there. You can see what the wires of the cage did to my fingers. Of course, it happened so quickly that these things didn't get so awfully cold . . . but I've an idea we've seen a demonstration of absolute zero. And if we have, thank heavens, that dastardly criminal is dead!"

The girl looked at him, blinked her eyes, looked away, then back at him.

"Sid," she said, "you're talking nonsense. There's something

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wrong with you. You're upset."

"Nothing of the sort! Just because it's never been done, you think it can't be done. Suppose, twenty years ago, some one had led you into a room and showed you a modern radio. You'd have sworn it was a fake because the thing was simply impossible. As it was, your mind was prepared for the radio and what it would do. You accepted it gradually, until it became a part of your everyday life.

"Now, look at this thing scientifically.

"We know that heat is merely the result of internal molecular motion. The more heat, the more motion. Therefore, the more heat, the more volume. For instance, a piece of red-hot metal takes up more space than a piece of ice-cold metal. Heat expands. Cold contracts.

"Now, ever since these things began to be known, scientists have tried to determine what is known as *absolute* zero. It's the place at which all molecular motion would cease. Then we begin to wonder what would happen to matter at that temperature.

"It's certain that the molecules themselves are composed of atoms, the atoms of electrons, that the amount of actual solid in any given bit of matter is negligible if we could lump it all together. It's the motion of the atoms, electrons and molecules that gives what we see as substance.

"Now, we have only to stop that motion and matter would utterly disappear, as we are accustomed to see it."

THE girl was interested, but failed to grasp the full import of what Rodney was telling her.

"But when the body started to shrink it would generate a heat of its own," she objected. "Push a gas into a smaller space and it gets hotter than it was. That temperature runs up fast. I remember having a man explain artificial refrigeration. He said . . ."

"Of course," interrupted Sid impatiently. "That's elemental. And no one has ever reached an absolute zero as yet. But suppose one did? And remember this, all living matter is composed of cells.

"Now, this man hasn't made inanimate matter disappear. But he seems to have worked out some method, perhaps by a radio wave or some etheric disturbance, by which certain specially prepared bodies vanish into thin air, leaving behind very low temperatures.

"Probably there is something in the very life force itself which combines with this ray to eliminate life, termperature, substance. Think of what that means!"

She sighed and shook her head.

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"I'm sorry, Sid, but I just can't follow you. They'll find Dangerfield somewhere or other. Probably there was some secret passage in that room. The fact that there were two here indicates that there must be others in that room.

"You've been working on this thing until it's got you groggy. Go home and roll in for a few hours' sleep—please."

He grimly shook his head.

"I know I'm working on a live lead."

She moved away from him.

"Be good, Sid. I've got to telephone in a story to the rewrite, and I've got to write some sob-sister articles. They will be putting out extras. I think this is all that's going to develop here."

Sid Rodney watched her move away.

He shrugged his shoulders, turned his attention to the empty cage in which the white rats had been playing about.

His jaw was thrust forward, his lips clamped in a firm, straight line.

CHAPTER 6

STILL THEY VANISH

CAPTAIN HARDER lay on the hospital bed, his grizzled face drawn and gray. The skin seemed strangely milky and the eyes were tired. But the indomitable spirit of the man kept him driving forward.

Sid Rodney sat on the foot of the bed, smoking a cigarette.

Captain Harder had a telephone receiver strapped to his left ear. The line was connected directly with headquarters. Over it, he detailed such orders as he had to his men.

Betweentimes he talked with the detective.

The receiver rattled with metallic noises. Captain Harder ceased talking to listen to the message, grunted.

He turned to Sid Rodney.

"They've literally torn the interior out of that room where we found the empty clothes," he said. "There isn't the faintest sign of a passageway. There isn't any exit, not a one. It's solid steel, lined with asbestos, backed with concrete. Evidently a room for experiments. . . Oh, Lord, that shoulder feels cold!

"Hello, here's something else."

The telephone receiver again rattled forth a message.

Captain Harder's eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets.

"What?" he yelled.

The receiver continued to rattle forth words.

"Well, don't touch a thing. Take photographs. Get the fingerprint men to work on the case. Look at the watch and see if it stopped, and, if it did, find out what time it stopped."

He sighed, turned from the mouthpiece of the telephone to

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stare at Sid Rodney with eyes that held something akin to panic in them.

"They've found the clothes of Arthur Soloman, the banker!"

Sid Rodney frowned.

"The clothes?"

The officer sighed, nodded, weakly.

"Yes, the clothes."

"Where?"

"They were sitting at the steering wheel of Soloman's roadster. The car had skidded into the curb. The clothes are all filled out just as though there'd been a human occupant that had slipped out of them by melting into the thin air. The shoes are laced. One of the feet, or, rather, one of the empty shoes is on the brake pedal of the machine. The sleeves of the coat are hung over the wooden rim of the steering wheel. The collar's got a tie in it. . . Just the same as the way we found Dangerfield's clothes.

"One of the men found the roadster and reported. The squad that handled the Dangerfield case went out there on the jump. . ."

He broke off as the receiver started to rattle again.

He listened, frowned, grunted.

"Okay, go over everything with a fine-toothed comb," he said, and turned once more to Sid Rodney.

"The watch," he said, "had stopped, and didn't start running again until the officer took it out of the pocket and gave it just a little jar in so doing. The hands pointed to exactly thirteen minutes past ten o'clock."

"That," observed Rodney, "was more than two hours after Albert Crome had died, more than two hours after the disappearance of the white rats."

Captain Harder rolled his head from side to side on the propped-up pile of pillows.

"Forget those white rats, Rodney. You're just making a spectacular something that will frighten the public to death. God knows they're going to be panicky enough as it is. I'd feel different about the thing if I thought there was anything to it."

RODNEY nodded, got up from the bed.

"Well, captain, when they told me you were keeping your finger on the job, I decided to run in and tell you, so you'd know as much about it as I do. But I tell you I *saw* those white rats vanish."

The captain grinned.

"Seen 'em myself, Rodney, in a magician's show. I've seen a woman vanish, seen another one sawed in two. I've even seen pink elephants walking along the foot of the bed—but that was in the old days."

Sid Rodney matched his grin, patted the captain's foot beneath

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the spotless white of the hospital bedspread.

"Take care of yourself, old timer, and don't let this thing keep you from getting some sleep. You've lost some blood and you'll need it. Where were the banker's clothes found?"

"Out on Seventy-first and Boyle Streets."

"They leaving them there?"

"For the time being. I'm going to have the car finger-printed from hood to gas tank. And I'm having the boys form a line and close off the street. We're going to go all over the thing with a fine-toothed comb, looking for clues.

"If you want to run out there you'll find Selby in charge. Tell him I said you were to have any of the news, and if you find out anything more, you'll tell me, won't you?"

"Sure, Cap. Sure."

"Okay. So long."

And Captain Harder heaved a tremulous sigh.

Sid Rodney walked rapidly down the corridor of the hospital, entered his car, drove at once to Seventy-first near where it intersected Boyle.

There was a curious crowd, being kept back by uniformed officers.

Sid showed his credentials, went through the lines, found Detective Sergeant Selby, and received all of the latest news.

"We kept trying to locate Soloman at his home. He came in, all right, and his wife told him we were trying to get him. He went to the telephone, presumably to call police headquarters, and the telephone rang just as he was reaching for the receiver.

"He said 'hello,' and then said a doubtful 'yes.' His wife heard that much of the conversation. Then she went into another room. After that she heard Soloman hang up the receiver, and walk into the hall where he reached for his hat and coat.

"He didn't tell her a word about where he was going. Just walked out, got in his car and drove away. She supposed he was coming to police headquarters."

Sid lit a cigarette.

"Find out who he called?"

"Can't seem to get a lead on it."

"Was he excited?"

"His wife thought he was mad at something. He slammed the door as he went out."

"These the clothes he was wearing?"

"Yes."

Sid Rodney nodded.

"Looks just like another of those things. Thanks, Selby. I'll be seeing you."

"Keep sober," said the police detective.

SID RODNEY drove to Arthur Soloman's residence.

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Newspaper reporters, photographers and detectives were there before him. Mrs. Soloman was staring in dazed confusion, answering questions mechanically, posing for photographs.

She was a dried-out wisp of a woman, tired-eyed, docile with that docility which comes to one whose spirit has been completely crushed by the constant inhibitions imposed by a domineering mate.

Sid Rodney asked routine questions and received routine answers. He went through the formula of investigation, but there was a gnawing uneasiness in his mind. Some message seemed to be hammering at the borderline of his consciousness, as elusive as a dream, as important as a forgotten appointment.

Sid Rodney walked slightly to one side, tried to get away from the rattle of voices, the sputter of flash lights as various photographs were made.

So far there were only a few who appreciated the full significance of those vacant clothes, propped up behind the steering wheel of the empty automobile.

The telephone rang, rang with the insistent repetition of mechanical disinterest. Some one finally answered. There was a swirl of motion, a beckoning finger.

"Rodney, it's for you."

Vaguely wondering, Rodney placed the receiver to his ear. There was something he wanted to think about, something he wanted to do, and do at once. Yet it was evading his mind. The telephone call was just another interruption which would prevent sufficient concentration to get the answer he sought.

"Hello!" he rasped, and his voice did not conceal his irritation.

It was Ruby Orman on the line, and at the first sound of her voice Sid snapped to attention.

He knew, suddenly, what was bothering him.

Ruby should have been present at the Soloman house, getting sob-sister stuff on the fatherless children, the dazed widow who was trying to carry on, hoping against hope.

"What is it, Ruby?"

Her words rattled swiftly over the wire, sounded as a barrage of machine gunfire.

"Listen, Sid; get this straight, because I think it's important. I'm not over there at Soloman's because I'm running down something that I think is a hot lead. I want you to tell me something, and it may be frightfully important. What would a powder, rubbed in the hair, have to do with the disappearance, if it was the sort of disappearance you meant?"

Sid Rodney grunted and registered irritation.

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"What are you doing, Ruby—kidding me?"

"No, no. Tell me. It's a matter of life and death."

"I dont know, Ruby. Why?"

"Because I happen to know that Soloman had a little powder dusted on his hair. It was just a flick of the wrist that put it there. I didn't think much of it at the time. It looked like a cigarette ash, but I noticed that it seemed to irritate him, and he kept scratching at his head. Did you notice?"

"No," snapped Sid, interested. "What makes you think it had anything to do with what happened afterward?"

"Because I got to investigating about that powder, and wondering, and I casually mentioned the theory you had, and I felt a prickling in my scalp, and then I knew that some of that same powder had been put in my hair. I wonder if . . ."

Sid Rodney was at instant attention.

"Where are you now?"

"Over in my apartment. I've got an appointment. It's important. You can't come over. If it's what I think it is, the mystery is going to be solved. You're right. It's absolute zero, and—My God, Sid, it's getting cold . . ."

And there was nothing further, nothing save the faint sounds of something thump-thump-thumping—the receiver, dangling from the cord, thumping against the wall.

RODNEY didn't stop for his hat. He left the room on the run. A newspaper reporter saw him, called to him, ran to follow. Sid didn't stop. He vaulted into his car, and his foot was pressing the starter before he had grabbed the wheel.

He floor-boarded the throttle, and skidded at the corner with the car lurching far over against the springs, the tires shrieking a protest.

He drove like a crazy man, getting to the apartment where Ruby Orman spent the time when she was not sob-sistering for her newspaper. He knew he could beat the elevator up the three flights of stairs, and took them two at a time.

The door of the apartment was closed. Sid banged his fist upon it in a peremptory knock and then rattled the knob.

"Oh, Ruby!" he called softly.

A canary was singing in the apartment. Aside from that, there was no faintest suggestion of sound.

Sid turned the knob, pushed his shoulder against the door. It was unlocked. He walked into the apartment. The canary perked its head upon one side, chirped a welcome, then fluttered nervously to the other side of the cage.

Sid strode through the little

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sitting room to the dining room and kitchenette. The telephone was fastened to the wall here.

But the receiver was not dangling. It had been neatly replaced on its hook. But there was a pile of garments just below the telephone which made Sid stagger against the wall for a brief second before he dared to examine them.

He knew that skirt, that businesslike jacket, knew the sash, the shoes . . . He stepped forward.

They were Ruby's clothes, all right, lying there in a crumpled heap on the floor.

And at the sight Sid Rodney went berserk.

He flung himself from room to room, ripping open closet doors. For a wild moment he fought back his desire to smash things, tear clothes, rip doors from hinges.

Then he got a grip on himself, sank into a chair at the table, lit a cigarette with trembling hand. He must think.

Soloman had had something put in his hair, a powder which irritated . . . Ruby had seen that powder, flicked there—a casual gesture, probably, like a cigarette ash. The powder had irritated . . . Ruby had told some one person something of Rodney's theory. Powder had been applied to her hair. . . . She had known of it . . . She had telephoned . . . She had an appointment . . . And it had become cold . . . Then the clothes at the foot of the telephone . . .

And the chair in which Sid Rodney had been sitting was flung back upon its shivering legs as he leaped from the table —flung back by the violence of the motion with which he had gone into action.

He gained the door in three strides, took the stairs on the run, climbed into his automobile and drove like some mythical dust jinni scurrying forward on the crest of a March wind.

He whizzed through street intersections, disregarded alike traffic laws and arterial stops, swung down a wide street given over to exclusive residences, and came to a stop before a large house constructed along the conventional lines of English architecture.

He jumped from the machine, ran rapidly up the steps, held his finger against the doorbell.

A MAN in livery came to the door, regarded him with grave yet passive disapproval.

"This is the residence of P. H. Dangerfield?"

"Yes."

"His secretary, Mr. Sands, is here?"

"Yes."

"I want to see him," said Sid, and started to walk into the door.

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The servant's impassive face changed expression by not so much as a flicker, but he moved his broad bulk in such a manner as to stand between the detective and the stairs.

"If you'll pardon me, sir, the library to the left is the reception room. If you will give me your name and wait there I'll tell Mr. Sands that you are here. Then, *if* he wishes to see you, you will be notified."

There was a very perceptible emphasis upon the word "if."

Sid Rodney glanced over the man's shoulder at the stairs.

"He's upstairs, I take it?"

"Yes, sir, in the office, sir."

Sid Rodney started up.

The servant moved with swiftness, once more blocking the way.

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

His eyes were hard, his voice firm.

Sid Rodney shook his head impatiently, as a fighter shakes the perspiration out of his eyes, as a charging bull shakes aside some minor obstruction.

"To hell with that stuff! I haven't got time!"

And Sid Rodney pushed the servant to one side.

The man made a futile grab at Sid's coat.

"Not so fast . . ."

Sid didn't even look back. "Faster, then!" he said, with a cold grin.

The arm flashed around and down. The liveried servant spun, clutched at the cloth, missed, and went backward down the few steps to the landing.

Rodney was halfways up the stairs by the time the servant had scrambled over to hands and knees.

"Oh, Sands!" called Rodney.

There was no answer.

Rodney grunted, tried a door—a bedroom; another door—a bath; another door—the office.

It seemed vacant. A desk, a swivel chair, a leather-covered couch, several sectional bookcases, some luxuriously comfortable chairs, a filing case or two . . . and Sid Rodney jumped back with a startled exclamation.

A suit of clothes was spread out on the couch.

He ran toward it.

It was the checkered suit Sands had been wearing at the time of the interview at police headquarters. It was quite empty, was arranged after the manner of a suit spread out upon the couch in the same position a man would have assumed had he been resting.

Rodney bent over it.

There was no necktie around the collar of the shirt. The sleeves of the shirt were in the coat. The vest was buttoned over the shirt. The shoes were on the floor by the side of the couch, arranged as though they had

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been taken off by some man about to lie down.

CHAPTER 7

A FIEND IS UNMASKED

SID RODNEY went through the pockets with swift fingers. He found a typewritten note upon a bit of folded paper. It bore his name and he opened and read it with staring eyes.

> Sid Rodney, Ruby Orman and Bob Sands, each one to be visited by the mysterious agency which has removed the others. This is no demand for money. This is a sentence of death.

Sid Rodney put the paper in his own pocket, took the watch from the suit, checked the time with the time of his own watch. They were identical as far as the position of the hands was concerned.

Sid Rodney replaced the watch, started through the rest of the pockets, found a cigarette case, an automatic lighter, a knife, fountain pen and pencil, a ring of keys, a wallet.

He opened the wallet.

It was crammed with bills, bills of large denomination. There were some papers as well, a letter in feminine handwriting, evidently written by an old friend, a railroad folder, a prospectus of an Oriental tour.

There was another object, an oblong of yellow paper, printed upon, with blanks left for data and signature. It was backed with carbon compound so as to enable a duplicate impression to be made, and written upon with pencil.

Sid studied it.

It was an express receipt for the shipment of a crate of machinery from George Huntley to Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. The address of the sender was given as 753 Washington Boulevard.

Sid puckered his forehead.

No. 753 Washington Boulevard was the address of Albert Crome.

Sid opened the cigarette case. Rather a peculiar odor struck his nostrils. There was a tobacco odor, also another odor, a peculiar, nostril-puckering odor.

He broke open one of the cigarettes.

So far as he could determine, the tobacco was of the ordinary variety, although there was a peculiar smell to it.

The lighter functioned perfectly. The fountain pen gave no hint of having been out of condition. Yet the clothes were as empty as an empty meal sack.

Sid Rodney walked to the door.

He found himself staring into the black muzzle of a huge revolver.

"Stand back, sir. I'm sorry, sir, but there have been strange goings on here, sir, and you'll get your hands up, or, by the

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Lord, sir, I shall let you have it, right where you're thickest, sir."

It was the grim-faced servant, his eyes like steel, his mouth stretched across his face in a taut line of razor-thin determination.

Sid laughed.

"Forget it. I'm in a hurry, and . . ."

"When I count three, sir, I shall shoot . . ."

There was a leather cushion upon one of the chairs. Sid sat down upon that leather cushion, abruptly.

"Oh, come, let's be reasonable."

"Get your hands up."

"Shucks, what harm can I do. I haven't got a gun, and I only came here to see if I couldn't . . ."

"One . . . two . . ."

RODNEY raised his weight, flung himself to one side, reached around, grasped the leather cushion and flung it. He did it all in one sweeping, scrambling motion.

The gun roared for the first time as he flung himself to one side. It roared the second time as the spinning cushion hurtled through the air.

Sid was conscious of the mushrooming of the cushion, the scattering of hair, the blowing of bits of leather. The cushion smacked squarely upon the end of the gun, blocking the third shot. Before there could have been a fourth, Sid had gone forward, tackling low. The servant crashed to the floor.

It was no time for etiquette, the hunting of neutral corners, or any niceties of sportsmanship. The stomach of the servant showed for a moment, below the rim of the leather cushion, and Sid's fist was planted with nice precision and a degree of force which was sufficiently adequate, right in the middle of that stomach.

The man doubled.

Sid Rodney took the gun from the nerveless fingers, scaled it down the hall where it could do no harm, and made for the front door. He went out on the run.

Once in his car, he started for the address which had been given on the receipt of the express company as the destination of the parcel of machinery, Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. It was a slender clue, yet it was the only one that Sid possessed.

He made the journey at the same breakneck speed that had characterized his other trips. The car skidded to the curb in front of a rather sedate looking house which was in a section of the city where exclusive residences had slowly given way to cleaning establishments, tailor shops, small industries, cheap boarding houses.

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Sid ran up the steps, tried the bell.

There was no response. He turned the knob of the door. It was locked. He started to turn away when his ears caught the light flutter of running steps upon an upper floor.

The steps were as swiftly agile as those of a fleeing rabbit. There followed, after a brief interval, the sound of pounding feet, a smothered scream, then silence.

Sid rang the bell again.

Again there was no answer.

There was a window to one side of the door. Sid tried to raise it, and found that it was unlocked. The sash slid up, and Sid clambered over the sill, dropped to the floor of a cheaply furnished living room.

He could hear the drone of voices from the upper floor, and he walked to the door, jerked it open, started up the stairs. Some instinct made him proceed cautiously, yet the stairs creaked under the weight of his feet.

He was halfway up the stairs when the talking ceased.

Once more he heard the sounds of a brief struggle, a struggle that was terminated almost as soon as it had begun. Such a struggle might come from a cat that has caught a mouse, lets it almost get away, then swoops down upon it with arched back and needle-pointed claws.

THEN there was a man's voice, and he could hear the words:

"Just a little of the powder on your hair, my sweet, and it will be almost painless. . . . You know too much, you and your friend. But it'll all be over now. I knew he would be suspecting me, so I left my clothes where they'd fool him. And I came and got you.

"You washed that first powder out of your hair, didn't you, sweet? But this time you won't do it. Yes, my sweet, I knew Crome was mad. But I played on his madness to make him do the things I wanted done. And then, when he had become quite mad, I stole one of his machines.

"He killed Dangerfield for me, and that death covered up my own short accounts. I killed the banker because he was such a cold-blooded fish . . . Cold-blooded, that's good."

There was a chuckle, rasping, mirthless, the sound of scraping objects upon the floor, as though some one tried to struggle ineffectively. Then the voice again.

"I left a note in my clothes, warning of the deaths of you, of myself, and of that paragon of virtue, Sid Rodney, who gave you the idea in the first place. Later on, I'll start shaking down the millionaires, but no one will suspect me. They'll think I'm dead.

"It's painless. Just the first

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chill, then death. Then the cells dissolve, shrink into a smaller and smaller space, and then disappear. I didn't get too much of it from Crome, just enough to know generally how it works. It's sort of an etheric wave, like radio and X-ray, and the living cells are the only ones that respond so far. When you've rubbed this powder into the hair . . ."

Sid Rodney had been slowly advancing. A slight shadow of his progress moved along the baseboard of the hall.

"What's that?" snapped the voice, losing its gloating monotone, crisply aggressive.

Sid Rodney stepped boldly up the last of the stairs, into the upper corridor.

A man was coming toward him. It was Sands.

"Hello, Sands," he said. "What's the trouble here?"

Sands was quick to take advantage of the lead offered. His right hand dropped to the concealment of his hip, but he smiled affably.

"Well, well, if it isn't my friend Sid Rodney, the detective! Tell me, Rodney, have you got anything new? If you haven't, I have. Look here. I want you to see something. . . "

And he jumped forward.

But Rodney was prepared. In place of being caught off guard and balance, he pivoted on the balls of his feet and snapped home a swift right.

The blow jarred Sands back. The revolver which he had been whipping from his pocket shot from his hand in a glittering arc and whirled to the floor.

Rodney sprang forward.

The staggering man flung up his hands, lashed out a vicious kick. Then, as he got his senses cleared from the effects of the blow, he whirled and ran down the hall, dashed into a room and closed the door.

Rodney heard the click of the bolt as the lock was turned.

"Ruby!" he called. "Ruby!"

She ran toward him, attired in flowing garments of colored silk, her hair streaming, eyes glistening.

"Quick!" she shouted. "Is there any of that powder in your hair? Do you feel an itching of the scalp?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me what's happened."

"Get him first," she said.

SID RODNEY picked up the revolver which he had knocked from the hand of the man he hunted, advanced toward the door.

"Keep clear!" yelled Sands from behind that door.

Rodney stepped forward.

"Surrender, or I'll start shooting through the door!" he threatened.

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There was a mocking laugh, and something in that laugh warned Rodney; for he leaped back, just as the panels of the door splintered under a hail of lead which came crashing from the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun.

"I'm calling the police!" shouted Ruby Orman.

Sid saw that she was at a telephone, placing a call.

Then he heard a humming noise from behind the door where Sands had barricaded himself. It was a high, buzzing note, such as is made by a high-frequency current meeting with resistance.

"Quick, Ruby! Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, and came to him. "I've called the police."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just what you thought—absolute zero. Crome perfected the process by which any form of cell life could be made receptive to a certain peculiar etheric current. But there had to be a certain chemical affinity first.

"He achieved this by putting a powder in the hair of his victims. The powder irritated the scalp, but it did something to the nerve ends which made them receptive to the current.

"I mentioned your theory to Sands. At the time I didn't know about the powder. But I had noticed that when the banker was talking with Captain Harder, Sands had flipped some ashes from the end of his cigarette so that they had lit on the hair on the back of Soloman's head, and that Soloman had started to rub at his head shortly afterward as though he had been irritated by an itching of the scalp.

"Then Sands made the same gesture while he was talking with me. He left. I felt an itching, and wondered. So I washed my head thoroughly. Then I thought I would leave my clothes where Sands could find them, make him think he'd eliminated me. I was not certain my suspicions were correct, but I was willing to take a chance. I called you to tell you, and then I felt a most awful chill. It started at the roots of my hair and seemed to drain the very warmth right out of my nerves.

"I guess the washing hadn't removed all of that powder, just enough to keep me from being killed. I became unconscious. When I came to, I was in Sands's car. I supposed he had dropped in to make certain his machine had done the work.

"You know the rest . . . But how did you know where to look for me?"

RODNEY shook his head dubiously.

"I guess my brains must have been dead, or I'd have known long before. You see, the man

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who wrote the letters seemed to know everything that had taken place in Captain Harder's office when we were called in to identify that last letter from Dangerfield.

"Yet there was no dictograph found there. It might have been something connected with television, or, more likely, it might have been because some one who was there was the one who was writing those letters.

"If the story Sands had told had been true, the man who was writing the letters had listened in on what was going on in the captain's office, had written the warning note, had known just where Sands was going to be in his automobile, and had tossed it in.

"That was pretty improbable. It was much more likely that Sands had slipped out long enough to have written the letter and then brought it in with that wild story about men crowding him to the curb.

"Then, again, Sands carefully managed to sneak away when Harder raided that loft building. He really did it to notify the crazy scientist that the hiding place had been discovered.

"Even before you telephoned, I should have known Sands was in with the scientist. Afterward, it was, of course, apparent. You had seen some powder placed in Soloman's hair. That meant it must have been done when you were present. That narrowed the list of suspects to those who were also present.

"There were literally dozens of clues pointing to Sands. He was naturally sore at the banker for not coming through with the money. If they'd received it, they'd have killed Dangerfield anyhow. And Sands was to deliver that money. Simple enough for him to have pretended to drop the package into the receptacle, and simply gone on . . ."

A siren wailed.

There was a pound of surging feet on the stairs, blue-coated figures swarming over the place.

"He's behind that door, boys," Rodney, "and he's armed."

"No use getting killed, men," said the officer in charge. "Shoot the door down."

Guns boomed into action. The lock twisted. The wood splintered and shattered. The door quivered, then slowly swung open as the wood was literally torn away from the lock.

Guns at ready, the men moved into the room.

They found a machine, very similar to the machine which had been found in the laboratory of the scientist. It had been riddled with gunfire.

They found an empty suit of clothes.

Rodney identified them as being the clothes Sands had worn

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when he last saw the man. The clothes were empty, and were cold to the touch. Around the collar, where there had been a little moisture, there was a rim of frost.

There was no outlet from the room, no chance for escape.

Ruby looked at Sid Rodney, nodded.

"He's gone," she said.

Rodney took her hand.

"Anyhow, sister, I got here in time."

"Gee, Sid, let's tie a can to that brother-and-sister stuff. I thought I had to fight love to make a career, but when I heard your steps on the stairs, just when I'd given up hope . . ."

"Can you make a report on what happened?" asked the sergeant, still looking at the cold clothes on the floor.

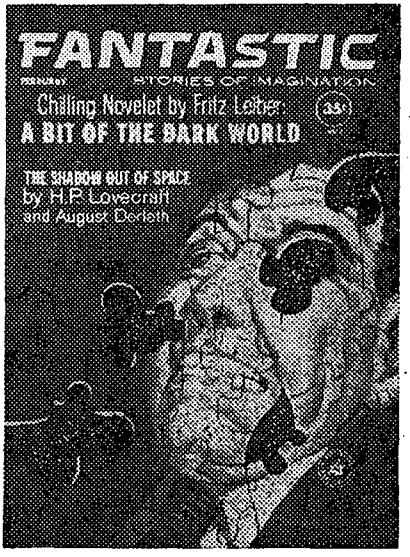
Sid Rodney answered in muffled tones.

"Not right now," he said. "I'm busy."

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

From the vast void of the Universe comes a shred of chilling blackness—



In the February issue of FANTASTIC, author **Fritz Leiber** tells what it is, and what it does. In "A Bit of the Dark World," Leiber is at his weird best.

The bonus reprint will be another tale of eerie horror—*"The Shadow Out of Space,"* by **H. P. Lovecraft** and **August Derleth.**

Topping a list of ghoulish short stories will be "What If," by **William W. Stuart.**

All this, plus the regular departments, will be on sale at your newsstand January 18. Don't miss February FANTASTIC.

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By PAUL DELLINGER

Illustrator SUMMERS

The thing from the stars was in the cellar. It had to be killed tonight, for tomorrow it—and its kind—would rule the world.

SEVERAL years have passed since that wet summer night when two policemen responded to my frantic telephone call for help, and any tales dating from that terrible experience have doubtless been long forgotten. Vague murmurings which did arise seem to have been quickly squelched by officers Murphy and Peterson who, in their misplaced but genuine kindness, went to save an old man from small town ridicule.

Yet I feel that some account of the incident should be written down for future reference, while there is time. Not that I anticipate departing from this life in the near future, despite my seventy-plus years and crippled condition . . . but the automobile accident which restricted me to this wheelchair when I was a relatively young M.D. shows the utter unpredictability of the world today. Had it not happened, I flatter myself that I might have gone on to enjoy a highly successful medical career, instead of

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running Dr. Dugan's Animal Hospital here in my home.

No, it is not the thought of imminent death which makes me record this, but rather certain disturbing events that appear with distressing frequency in the newspapers. What rational explanation can be given for a seemingly content husband and father who suddenly turns like a mad dog on his family? And can all the juvenile delinquency of this decade really be traced to bad television shows?

Our fledgling flights into outer space, which had already yielded possible evidence of life on fallen meteorites, also prompted this account. Could there have been, as rumors state, an earlier Russian astronaut who returned a changed, presumably insane man? No one knows, but I have my own ideas.

OFFICER Murphy also had some ideas of his own, which he did not hesitate to voice, as he and Peterson stood in dripping confusion just inside my spacious living room. "Damn it to hell, Doc," he said among other less mild things, "are you saying you dragged us out in the middle of a night like this because of a rat in your basement?"

Murphy's rather large pug nose had a well-known habit of taking on a reddish tinge whenever its owner experienced any emotions of anger. Now it was positively blazing. "No, gentlemen, it's much more than that. This particular rodent. . . ." I searched for something close enough to the truth to mollify him and still be believable. "Well, it may be the carrier of a dangerous virus. In any case, it must be destroyed quickly."

Peterson, the smaller of the two officials, had deposited his wet raincoat on my sofa and now began his little ritual of shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, creating a constant creaking of floorboards. Murphy was somewhat calmed, judging by his nose at least, but no happier when he asked, "How do you know the rat's diseased, Doc? You been able to examine it?"

Had the situation not been critical, I could hardly have kept from laughing. I had examined the thing all right . . . not the way Murphy meant, but I'd examined it. Only the doctor was on the couch that time.

"I can't give a detailed explanation now, Officer Murphy. Please just take my word."

"Maybe I could shoot it, Doc," Peterson suggested eagerly. "Should I try and shoot it, Murph?"

"This time of night?" Murphy thundered incredulously. "People around here would think the world was coming to an end or something. Like those two nuts

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down by the dump last night remember?"

"Yeah, I guess," agreed the other reluctantly. "Besides, if it's all that dangerous, we might get bit or something," he added authoritatively.

"Pete's right for once, Doc. Anyway, this is a job for the Health Commissioner," Murphy said with sudden inspiration. "If we started taking pot shots in your cellar, one of those animals in your nursery might get hurt." He gestured toward the interior of my house, most of which was occupied by cages for various sizes and types of pets. "You wouldn't want to take a chance like that, would you Doc?"

I RECOGNIZED Murphy's crude psychology as an appeal to my soft spot for animals, known to everyone. When I first opened the hospital following my accident, I could tell that most of my customers were just trying to help out a man who refused charity. But now I believed it existed on its own merits. Right now, for instance, I was caring for two dogs, several cats and one rabbit for vacationing families, as well as the usual sick pets. I was also busy trying to find homes for three litters of kittens, which had been found abandoned and brought to me.

But more urgent matters had occupied me since morning. That was when I had first laid eyes on a tiny gray rat which had somehow gotten inside and, intriguing me by his lack of fright, stationed himself by my basement door and stared at me expectantly until I opened it.

I realized that Murphy was hopefully awaiting an answer I could not give. "You needn't use firearms at all," I told him. "That basement is solid concrete all around. There's no hiding place. I can't get down there, but you can. You could crush it with something, or just step on it!"

"You sure don't sound like the town's one-man SPCA, Doc," Murphy grumbled sourly, "even if it is just a rat."

Luckily he had not thought to question me about how the rat originally got into the basement. It would have been awkward to say the rat had asked . . . even though the real communication began afterward.

"I'm sure you did what you thought best, Doc," Murphy rumbled on in a manner indicating finality, "and we'll put in a call to the Public Health Office first thing tomorrow. You can explain everything to them."

"Tomorrow will be too late! By morning it can try again. Only at night. . . ." I stopped, realizing I was making no sense to them. "Please, Officer Murphy, I beg you. Just do this without questions."

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PETE, still rocking from side to side, spoke up again. "Why don't we just take a real quick look down there, Murph? A real quick look wouldn't hurt."

"You've gotta get mixed up in everything, don't you?" Murphy roared, his nose flaring warning signals again. "Last night you dragged me out to hear that damned fool story about a meteor, and now. . . ."

"But I was right about that," wailed Pete. "You said yourself something must've happened there."

"Well it sure wasn't a meteor or we'd have found it!"

"All right, then what. . . ."

"Gentlemen! Please! Officer Murphy, listen to me a minute," I found myself shouting. "This was last night? In the vicinity of the garbage repository? Something resembling a meteorite?"

Pete seemed about to plunge enthusiastically into the subject, but Murphy stopped him. "Just a couple drunks, Doc. Said something flashed down out of the sky and exploded near 'em before they beat it. Probably some practical joker with a firecracker."

Normally, this explanation would have completely satisfied me, but things were now far from normal. The time factor, the fragments of information I'd gleaned from my "visitor," everything fitted.

"They spread all kinds of tales about it," Pete began gleefully to Murphy's evident disgust. "Some kind of flying saucer, something from a Russian spootnik . . . but how'd you know about it so exact, Doc? You couldn't have been out . . . well, I mean you're tied up here and all. . . ." He broke off, embarrassed, and stood shifting from one foot to the other looking guilty and awkward.

Murphy, his face almost as red as his nose, cut the silence gruffly. "'Course it makes lots of sense for sputniks and UFO's to land at a town dump. Hell, I went over the whole area and couldn't find anything but junk. And after all, that's what the place is for." He laughed, a trifle too loudly, and Pete joined in uncertainly. My expression must have remained grim, preoccupied as I was, because Murphy finally cleared his throat and mentioned departing.

"No, Officer Murphy, wait," I cried desperately, wheeling my chair forward. I hesitated, then made my great error. "All right, I'll tell you the real nature of this thing. Physically it's a rat, yes, but controlled by a malevolent intelligence, an unearthly parasite that regards our forms of life as mere physical containers for its use. And unless it's destroyed before morning, it will bring others. There's no time to waste. You must kill it now."

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MURPHY'S nose now resembled a neon light, but he restrained himself admirably. "You're not making any sense at all, Doc," he said, buttoning his raincoat at the collar. "Look . . . it's a lousy night and we can all use some sleep. Things will look different to you tomorrow."

"Things will *be* different tomorrow!" I exploded angrily. "Once the sun comes up in the morning, this thing will be able to contact others of its kind, directing them to a new host source. Don't you understand? They aren't limited to living out their lives in the bodies of rodents. Any living organism . . ."

"Now wait a minute, Doc!" Murphy's bellow drowned mine. Even Pete stopped his nervous energy dance. "Just what are you trying to prove with this crazy story? Next you'll be saying the rat told you all this."

"Not exactly, but . . ." I hesitated. How could I explain those dream-like thoughts and images, not even related to words, that I had experienced all day and from which I had pieced together what I knew? Call it telepathy? I supposed that was closest, but could imagine Murphy's reaction to the word.

So much was unclear even to me. I did know that the entity which was now the rat was not physical in our sense, else it could not have lived in the emptiness of space. I knew it somehow utilized solar energy in trying to communicate with its species, because I had stopped receiving the by-products of its messages when the sun had set. And I knew it felt an exultant sense of expectancy about resuming its mental probes for companions, and must be destroyed before that time arrived.

"Looks like the rain's letting up," Pete shattered my thoughts, resuming his rock and roll act by my large picture window. "Murph, you reckon we should . . . you know . . . before it starts pouring again?"

"Yeah," Murphy nodded, turning up his collar, "yeah. Now Doc, you go on to bed and leave everything to us. We'll take care of it."

"Sure, Doc," Pete chimed in, "you forget all about it and get some shut-eye. We'll take charge from here on."

I JUST sat with my wheelchair in the center of the big room, starring stupidly at them. I fought back an urge to lunge after them, to drag them back, knowing I would only sprawl helplessly on the floor. I wanted to scream at them, tearing through that curtain of sure superiority behind which they humored me, but could make no sound. I just sat uselessly, as it now seemed I had done most of

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my life, watching them walk out the door, assuring me in turn that everything would be all right.

Then they were gone, and with them went all my hope. Alone I could do nothing. Even if I managed to get into the basement down those stairs, the "rat" could easily elude me until dawn. I even thought of setting fire to the place, but some busybody would be sure to call the fire department before the basement, actually the safest part of the house, could be exorcised of its alien inhabitant.

I rolled my chair over to the picture window where so often I had watched the world go by, and might now conceivably watch it end. The dark clouds were beginning to break up; one star was faintly perceptible, and I found myself wondering if it had planets whose inhabitants no longer lived their own lives, but served as physical shells for the mysterious life-forms from space.

Reason began to assert itself, raising vague doubts about my day's half-dream. Could Murphy and Peterson be right in their unspoken accusation? Perhaps it was all the product of a trapped imagination . . . trapped by two shattered and paralyzed legs.

Hastily, I headed my chair for the basement door and opened it. Nothing was visible in the rectangle of light thrown from the room behind me except the cold, gray floor below.

I HAD almost begun to feel relief when I caught a sudden tiny movement at the border between light and shadow. The darkness retreated as I opened the door farther, and what had once been a rat stared up at me across the impregnable abyss of thirteen wooden stairs.

Only the eyes showed it to be a rat no longer . . . eyes which reflected not merely cunning or malice, but an intelligent plan of *purpose.*

Keeping those gleaming eyes fastened upon me, the thing that had been spawned in the depths of space, yet wore the body of one of earth's lowliest animals, backed slowly into the blackness until it was again invisible. I slammed the door, but could not shut out my realization that I had imagined nothing.

For the first time since I had become fully aware of the creature's purpose, a lifetime ago, the sense of urgency left me. Defeat frustrated me at every turn. Perhaps a younger man would have felt differently in my position; I felt only that I had been trying to change a course of events that was unalterable. Whatever twisted evolution had produced these beings, they would doubtless emerge one day as the masters of all creation.

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Once my tension eased, I remembered all those animals caged in my house. I would probably be just a matter of time before they two became the physical hosts for an alien intellect, but there was no reason to keep them trapped with me at the source of the infection.

They were happy to see me, happier than usual. The dogs danced delightedly in their compartments amid a din of excited barking. Even some of the cats, despite their feline independence, joined in the noise as I unlatched their cages.

I waited for them to get out so I could free the dogs, but they made no attempt to leave the room. I could hardly navigate my wheelchair among the menagerie. Finally I realized the reason.

They were hungry. While I had been lying on the sofa receiving alien thoughts, none of these animals had been fed.

Revitalized, I pushed my chair clear and wheeled toward the cellar door, almost crashing into it. The knob slipped from my grasp twice before the door stood open, admitting light into a basement still as dark as the sky outside. Gently and quietly, I called:

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty. . . ."

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 AND JUNE 11, 1960 (74 STAT. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC, STORIES OF IMAGINATION published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1961.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 434 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago 5, Illinois.
Editor, Cele Goldsmith, 1 Park Ave., New York 16, New York.
Business Manager, Matthew T. Birmingham, Jr., 1 Park Ave., New York 16, New York.

2. The owner is Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 434 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago 5, Illinois.
Estate of William B. Ziff, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.
A. M. Ziff, 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required by the act of June 11, 1960 to be included in all statements regardless of frequency of issue.) 40,292.

MATTHEW T. BIRMINGHAM, JR.
(Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1961.

[SEAL]

WILLLIAM PROEHMER, Notary Public

State of New York, No. 41-8446350—Queens County, Cert. filed in New York County.
(Term Expires March 30, 1962.)

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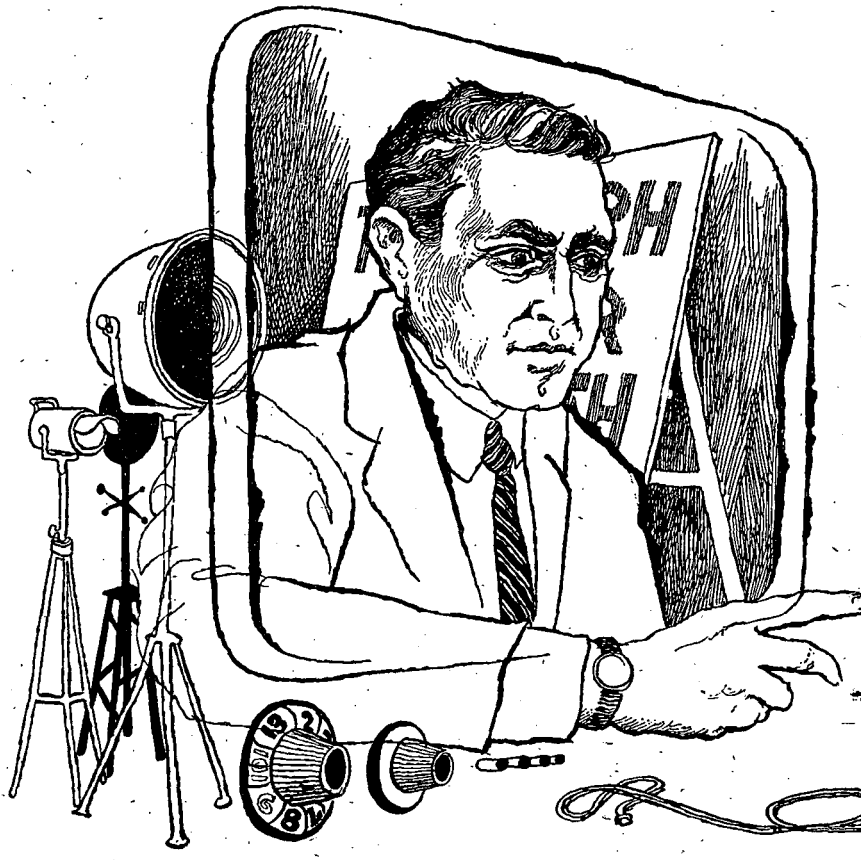
Don't breathe a word to the trade . . . they'd steal it before you could say 'Art Linkletter' . . . but here's the hottest new idea in video . . . just think of that curtain rising, the camera eye going to red, and the man saying, ever so dignified:

THIS IS YOUR DEATH

By ALBERT TEICHNER



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JACKSON and Cooper glared at each other across the conference table, then united in staring contemptuously down the table's length at each man present. There was the expected ripple of apprehension and much fingering of pencils, notepads and ties.

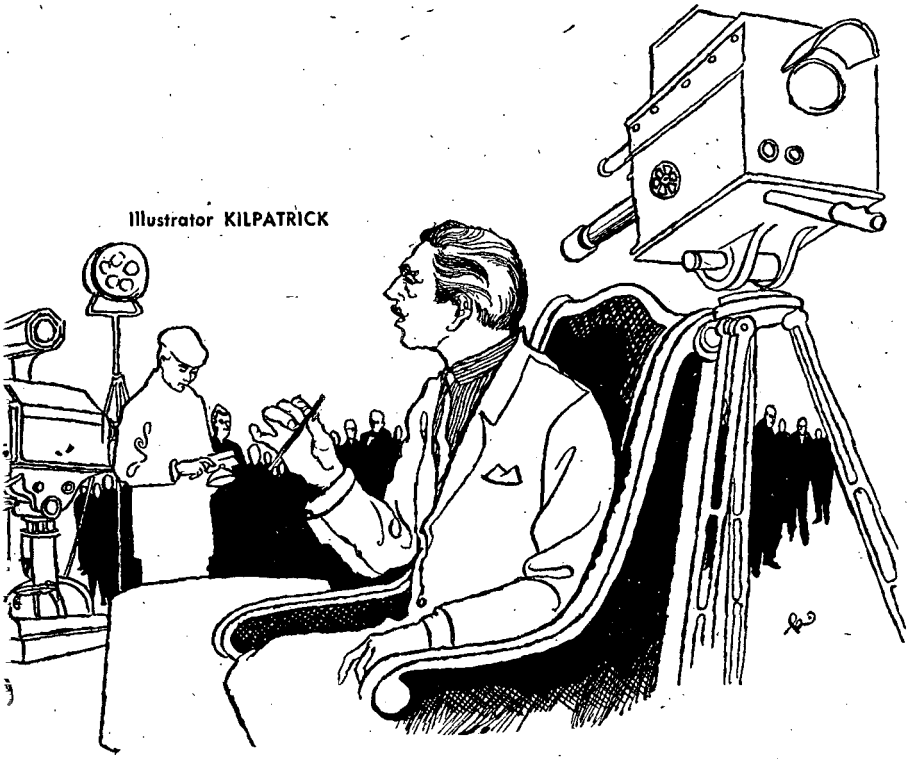
"I'm still waiting," Jackson said, his sunken cheeks collapsing more closely toward each other. "I've been waiting an hour to get one idea out of you people. Well?"

The two dozen men turned perky smiles toward their bosses as if ready to say something of urgent value as soon as the others had finished.

Cooper, bulge-eyed, panned the group in a blurring sweep. "The goose that laid the golden egg is dying. All 3-D gives us now is a fool's gold pebble."

Wright, a vice-president who knew when Cooper was pleased with a phrase, said: "Fool's gold pebbles on an asteroid—great for a space epic." His smile fell into a St. Bernard's droop. "When epic's come back."

"*When* is right."



Illustrator KILPATRICK

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"Stinks," Jackson grunted.

Dead silence fell over the meeting once more as each man contemplated the truth of Cooper's warning. For decades the viewing audience had been dropping and now it was slipping further. The sending networks had discovered that hard-core eye addicts would watch anything in 2- and 3-D, even the oldest re-runs which paid no royalties.

"All right," Jackson said finally. "I'm going to throw something at you." He pointed at the poised pencils and shouted, "Don't take more notes! That's just hiding your—your," he floundered for a phrase, "your spiritual bankruptcy. *Think.* Here goes. The key word in entertainment history is hypo, hypo all the way. Look at cartoon movies. Guys like Disney horsed around half a reel before they got to brass tacks, which was the cat chasing the mouse and getting banged flat, twisted, stretched, chopped up and every other thing the average guy would like to do if he had the nerve. Then along comes an unknown genius and he says, cut out the pretty junk, let's have one beating after another right from the first second." Jackson pounded the table. "He hypoed the thing into a capsule, that's what I said, a capsule!"

"Good thinking," said Cooper. "My turn now. Guys used to stare at pictures of beautiful women but their tastes kept improving. When there were no women beautiful enough the photographers used human-looking dolls. So what happened when the crazy public wanted something even better? They discovered the final secret, just photo the significant parts—that's what hypo means!"

"I'll give these boobs another example," said Jackson. "Take that musical fad twelve years ago. It only came on because Mr. Cooper and me, we figured the public didn't need a slow-moving story, just show production numbers. We cut up every old musical film from Busby Berkeley on and it was our most economical run of good luck. Digest it for 'em, H-Y-P-O it!" He paused ominously. "Well?"

SILENCE, pindropping silence. Then, suddenly, everyone turned a startled stare on a young assistant of about forty who had risen. He cleared his throat and talked rapidly as if afraid slowing down would bring him to his senses and a dead halt. "What does the public want most? Drama that won't bore its jaded palate. Well, what's drama's core? The death scene! Why not show only death scenes from old films, one right after the other? *Highlights of Life,* we could call it. Hypo *Death!*"

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"Stinks," Cooper said wryly.

"What's your name?" Jackson asked. "I never saw you here before."

There was a mass intake of breath, waiting for the minimum severance pay axe to drop.

"Donald Dawes," he said nervously. "I've been attending conferences for the past six months."

There was another mass intake at his lack of diplomacy.

"I'll tell you why it's lousy, son," said Cooper. "The public's seen too many death scenes. People figure just outside the frame some technician was reading a comic book—no realism."

"Oh." Dawes sat down.

"You're fired!" Jackson said. Dawes got up again. "No, not you, the rest of them. Fired with one year's severance."

Cooper glared at him but, sticking to the international executive code of no public recriminations, remained silent.

"But, Mr. Jackson," they all began wailing, finding their voices at last.

"Once more—I say you're fired with a year's severance. Now it's legally binding."

They streamed out of the room and there were some whoops as soon as the last man shut the door behind him. "Morons," Jackson muttered. "You see how some of them smiled?"

"Why not?" Cooper said drily. "A year's severance—not bad!"

"We're avoiding litigation—it's cheap at the price. Anyway the sky's going to be our limit again." He pointed at the lone figure at the other end of the table. "Dawes, you're now a vice-president, the only vice-president left, with double your present salary. Provided that Mr. Cooper also has no objection to our taking on Death as our silent partner."

Cooper's pupils were shrunk to beads frantically darting about to spot the idea behind all Jackson's sudden scene shifting. All he could mumble was, "Hypo. Hypo it! Yes, hypo it." Suddenly the pupils popped to full dilation. "Hypo Death! What an idea I've got! Dawes, you accept the promotion?"

The youthful face flushed with pleasure. "It's such a great honor, Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson. Only—I don't know what I've done."

"You got us thinking—that's what," said Jackson. "We get exclusive rights to *real* death bed scenes. All kinds of people will want to do it for—."

"—money, publicity, moral uplift, exhibitionism," Cooper went on. Just like the good old days again when each knew instinctively what the other was thinking. "*Triumph Over Death*—there's the title!"

Jackson flicked on the sound

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writer. "Market test title *Triumph Over Death*. Sampling: 10,000 in semi-depth." He rubbed his hands together. "We buy selected Critical Condition Lists from the medical associations."

"Metropolitan St. Petersburg's still tops. We used it on the rejuvenation products promotion."

"Right—Cleveland too. Have the best prospects depth-investigated, don't tell our detectives what's really up, not yet, evaluate yourself, what line of attack to take in each case."

"After the right sell we move in, make a capsule history of the guy, soft soap family members into the documentary picture. Now, whenever the signed-up subject is in really critical shape we have eye-taper cameras set up —very discreetly placed, we want people to act as natural as possible—and eventually we catch the death scene."

"Sure, there'll be lemons—some nut dropping dead in the street or somewhere else unexpected but the law of averages will give us a good library." Jackson stopped. "Look, Dawes, earn your keep. Knock it, knock it hard."

"Well—," Dawes hesitated, "people will say it's morbid, vulgar. They'll say the real thing's too horrible to stomach."

"Who cares what they'll say?" Cooper grinned. "They'll WATCH! Ever see an accident, everybody standing around getting nothing done but mumbling sympathetically how horrible it is but you don't see them going away unless they're afraid of being called as witnesses. Knock harder!"

"Well, what's special about death? Everybody sees it sooner of later around them."

"The life span's too long nowadays," said Jackson. "And then it's so professionalized you don't see much anyway. Why, there are millions of people over seventy who have never seen a stiff in their lives!"

"What's more," Cooper went on. "It's the one bit on *everybody's* schedule. You can estimate a hundred percent audience except for tiny tots, plus doctors, nurses and undertakers who see it every week."

"How could anybody get tired of real death scenes?" Jackson demanded. He blew three rings around his cigar. "It's a bottomless subject. People will fight to get on. They'll have a kind of immortality because the rushes will be revived again and again. Cooper, just think of those residuals!"

"I most certainly have."

Dawes threw up his hands. "How can I knock something that's foolproof? Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson—it's the final formula, the ultimate Hypo!" Dawes rubbed his brow. "But—."

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"Yes?" They said in unison.

"Well, isn't it going to take a long time to get it going?"

The slight tension vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "Son," Jackson laughed, "we'll have a minimum of eight programs on the feeder backlog inside of six weeks!"

"And we'll have a complete pilot film, death scene and all, under three weeks or you can say I don't know a damned thing about human nature."

"Mr. Cooper," Dawes said, genuinely moved, "I would never say a thing like that."

COOPER took over what he called the smelliest job, weeding down the medical lists for likely prospects. "Never saw so many clinkers in my life," he said, "I don't think half of them are ready to drop dead!" But the other half did make an interesting list.

Meanwhile Jackson consulted Brautz, the noted psychosocioanalyst. "Strictly confidential," he said. "Only a handful are in the picture so far."

"Haven't I always maintained Top Commercial Secrecy?" Brautz asked, professionally ruffled.

"Just standard routine, Doctor. Here goes—we're going to have a series on Death, the real thing, no dummies or actors playing the parts. Give us a report tomorrow." He watched Brautz for reactions as he spelled out the details but Brautz's face stayed properly blank; an expert worthy of respect didn't give his reactions away in non-billable form.

The compact report was on Jackson's desk, though, when he arrived the next morning. The first sheet was headed:

Psychoanalytic Conclusions On Proposed Death Series

I. The One-At-A-Time Law

(a) Mass death scenes from actuality have never done well with home viewers. Nazi concentration camp newsreels, documentaries on atomic wars have always been flicked off. Reasons: too vast to grasp; need to forget horror on such a scale; refusal to recognise one's own sadistic tendencies by declaring atrocities 'clever fakes.'

(b) Human beings can only understand One Thing At A Time. Example: during last great wave of germ warfare trials, limelight stolen by one woman killed trying to save her canary from electrocution in home permanent waving device.

(c) Proposed series overcomes (b). Shows One Death At A Time.

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II. Ultimate- Hypo Reversing Hypo Trend

(a) Sex, beat-'em-up and romance programs have to be hypoed more and more. This leads to dead end where addict no longer reacts.

(b) No need for dead end hypo with Death—ever. Not as long as audience has faith they're going to see real thing at end of hour.

III. Can Series Sell Products and Services?

(a) Useless for joy items. Guilt by association.

(b) Perfect for organisation merchandising anxiety items—save your health, cure your shortcomings, help the next guy, and so forth. *Note*: Very big for selling prestige of automated doctors as well as competing human ones.

IV. Handling Temporary Opposition of Professional Groups

At that point Jackson called for Cooper. "See anything here?" he asked.

Cooper retracted the bulge for near sight and swept down the center of the two sheets. "Yeah, the automated doctors," he said. "When our subjects take their home health readings it can activate the taper cameras for closer shots. And once it signals *Critical Now* the 3-D lenses will stay on permanently. The medical instrument makers will sponsor and human doctor associations will have to protect themselves with equal time."

"What's your first prospect?"

"A guy in St. Petersburg, where else? Only eighty-five too. He's got an incurable form of nerve cancer and—."

"You're sure it's incurable?" Jackson said anxiously. "I mean most of this stuff's child's play now, a few treatments and the guy could be cured."

"No, he can't last more than ten days."

"Any chance for a cure developing within ten days? The therapeutic computers—."

"Not a chance," Cooper grinned. "This is so peculiar they have *people* looking for a cure."

Jackson breathed easier. "I don't look for blood but you do have to protect your investment." He felt mellow and suddenly content with life. "Call the kid in. We'll take him along to learn the ropes. How do you size him up?"

Cooper grinned back. "We used to be that green."

"But not for long fortunately." He rang for Dawes and had hardly taken his finger off the tab before the honorary vice-president entered.

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"Something wrong?" Dawes asked anxiously.

They both cackled. "Getting anxious?" Cooper said. "Good executive sign."

"Thank you, Mr. Cooper." His light blue eyes said it too.

"You're coming on our first field trip." Jackson pressed his index fingers against the two vast dimples that were his cheeks and a hint of plastic molars seemed to show through the thin skin. "Subject has an incurable form of nerve cancer, only eighty-five."

"A shame," Dawes said absently. "Say, suppose a cure comes along?"

"It won't," said Cooper. "All been thoroughly researched. This Haley case should be an easy beginning for you, Dawes, because we're not using any tricks."

"Why not?" asked Dawes.

"Yeah, I'd like to know that too."

"Well," Cooper said, "*you* should have figured it, Jackson. This man's well-balanced, ready to face death, and has almost found peace—fortunately there's that *almost*. The Investigation Agency went through his psychoanalytic tapes, just two years old, and gave me a complete rundown."

"You heard the psychoanalytic tapes?" Dawes said, incredulous. "I thought they're completely private."

"Of course, they're private," Cooper said, "but we have special ways of getting to that sort of thing. After all, we do have a higher duty to the public."

"If it helped the company," Jackson said, "I'd let Cooper see my tapes any time."

"The same goes for me," said Cooper.

"Sure," Dawes said hastily. "I see your point. It's just that I didn't know so I was surprised."

"Oh, there'll be lots of surprises," Jackson chuckled.

THEY were in St. Petersburg at 12:30 that afternoon. William Haley's residence was a pleasant stucco cottage set in a small garden and was far out from the great metropolitan center.

"Another reason why he's such a good prospect," Cooper said as they passed on the other side of the road. "Fewer residences out here. More chance for privacy. Until we have this copyrighting pilot film in the can secrecy will be worth its weight in gold."

Suddenly a tall man rose from a row of chrysanthemum bushes close to the road wall. He was busy inspecting a flower and did not notice the trio studying him. "Our first prospect," Jackson said. "It's almost like pasting the first customer's dollar on the wall of a new business. Fine looking fellow."

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He was. Haley was perfectly erect and not an ounce of excess flesh showed anywhere on his frame. His face was serene as he considered the petals.

"Those flowers will still be blooming when he's dead," said Dawes. "Sad."

"The flowers still blooming," Cooper repeated. "Good, we'll use that as a motif."

The three men crossed over and stood on the grass border of the road, waiting. Finally, Cooper coughed and, as a few tiny petals floated to the ground, the older man looked up. "Beautiful roses," Cooper said. "Are they real?"

"They're not real roses."

"Oh?"

"They're real chrysanthemums." Jackson chuckled but Haley considered the error matter-of-factly. "Don't go in for planting artificials. Pretty to look at but I like things to be real. Who wants something always to stay the same? Would you like to stay as you are indefinitely, young man?"

"No," Cooper lied. "But I'm not as young as you think. Seventy-eight."

"There are differences more important than calendar years." His eyes narrowed to a horizon that seemed beyond that of the nearby golf course.

"You're eighty-five," Cooper said. He held his palm out in gentle admonition. "Oh, don't be surprised, Mr. Haley, we know a great deal about you—the *most important thing* in fact. Ten days."

"Are you a therapy team? I told the hospital no more treatments, human or mechanical. They can't give me what I still need."

"*I* can, Mr. Haley—*we* can, I should say. This is Fred Jackson. I'm Everett Cooper."

"Glad to meet you gentlemen." Haley merely nodded but gave in as three hands waved frantically over the low wall. "Heard your names somewhere before—no, my memory's bad these days. Well, Everett Cooper, what's your proposition?"

"Brass tacks, I like that. You're not worried about passing on—."

"You mean dying."

"—but you feel there's still unfinished business, right?"

"Right, but—."

"The business consists of two items. *A*—You have two children by your third marriage and you'd like to leave a decent inheritance. You haven't told them what's ahead for you. *B*—You feel your earlier life—five wives, highjinks all the way—was wasteful. You've come to a deeper view of things and want to set a better example. Well then, you can satisfy both these needs." He waved a check in the air.

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"Here's fifty thousand full-strength dollars, not the inflated variety, to go in trust for those kids the moment you sign with us."

"Say, I know you two." He looked mildly displeased. "You're Cooper-Jackson—."

"Jackson-Cooper," Jackson laughed. "Mustn't upset all our stationery. We did it on the toss of a coin."

"Used to be big, weren't you? Don't watch 2-D and 3-D any more. Nothing of value—." His eyes widened and he suddenly stared straight into Cooper's frozen grin. "Fifty thousand dollars! Why?"

"There's no catch—we *still* are the biggest producers, Mr. Haley. Now then, this is your role."

ALL philosophical detachment disappeared from the man's face as Jackson explained the details and by the time it was over he was misty-eyed. "Mr. Jackson."

"Call me Fred—please."

"Well, Fred, it's a beautiful idea. Could have been cheap and vulgar but it's above that. Sure, I want those things. I've plenty of home movie albums you can use—."

"The biggest well-known pain about amateurs," Cooper muttered to Dawes. "Advice!"

"—but no whitewash job. I want people to see some of the shortcomings that made it impossible for me to be curable now—to learn from it and from the way I've attained peace in the past few years."

Dawes, unable to restrain himself, broke in. "Mr. Haley, our most sacred rule is that the subject must give his approval to the background material before the big scene!"

Haley extended his hand to them again and said, "'Tell me not a man's life has been a happy one until I know the nature of his death.'"

"What show's that from?" Jackson asked.

"No show. Herodotus."

"Bill, would that be in the public domain?" Haley nodded. "Good. We'll use it—on your program if you don't object."

"Not at all. Gentlemen, I suppose we don't have completely the same motives but, still, I thank you. Now I must take my nap."

That same afternoon two camera technicians came down from New York and set the eye-tapers at various strategic locations in the cottage's walls. They also went over Haley's file of home films, the usual assortment, and everybody was very pleased with the material. By evening they had spliced three-quarters of an hour of life background and the legal details were settled in a series of iron-clad agreements.

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They got back to New York about three the next morning and sat around the office, too exultant to go directly to sleep. Jackson stared at Cooper through an empty shot glass and seemed to find him more human that way. "Got to give you credit, Cooper, you really did pick the set-up. I think this one's going to be a noble death."

"Thanks. We're going to get all kinds—snivelling, yelling, happy, twisted, crazy—and noble. You name it, somebody'll supply it."

"Any other really good leads?" Jackson demanded.

"A Gus Crakely in suburban Cleveland. Circulatory collapse—the medics have already overrun the workable limit for prosthetic plastic substitutes and now he has two weeks at most to go."

"Have to work fast. What about Cleveland tomorrow afternoon?" Worry caved his face in further than usual. "Got to get a feminine slant going too."

"Right."

"That's a small problem," said Dawes. "I've been going over a lot of studies and Brautz has confirmed my findings. Turns out women are more sympathetically interested in the deaths of men too. For every female death bed scene dramatized there are three and four-fifths male scenes."

"Good work." Jackson looked blearily at him but with a little more respect. "Now, Dawes, you'll come along with us tomorrow again, I mean this afternoon. After that you must manage your own field trips. We're going to be loaded with front office work here."

THEY awoke late that morning in a room heavy with the smell of dead tobacco smoke and whiskey. Dawes was pinkly brisk inside of five minutes but the two older men could not keep awake as they smacked bilious tongues and lips together and, after considering Dawes with disgust, swallowed SpeedUp pills.

"You have to be careful," Dawes said. "They're supposed to shorten your life. Most people can't get them."

"We certainly aren't most people," Jackson said grumpily.

But soon his eyes were bright again and he and Cooper were ready to grab the ball and start running. They reached Cleveland at four in the afternoon and, once more, had to head for the outskirts of town. The cabdriver left them at the Crakely gate and said, "Sorry, you'll have to go up the drive yourselves."

"What the hell's the matter?" Jackson demanded. "You'd think the house was haunted."

"Brother, it is—until old man Crakely dies. He's one hundred and thirty-eight but he'll live forever."

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Jackson looked distressed as the cab pulled away. Cooper laughed. "Don't worry, he's dying this time."

Dawes' eyes swept over the broad lawn to the great imitation of a Tudor pile beyond. "I'd sure like to have a place like this some day."

"The futility of ambition," Jackson sighed. "Mine is bigger, so is Cooper's, but we hardly ever get to see them."

A very suspicious aging man with a razor-sharp nose came to the door. He stayed behind it with only the nose and one green eye showing around its edge. "We're not buying anything," he said. "We have everything."

"Even enough money?" asked Cooper, handing in his gold leaf calling card.

Another eye and a mouth became visible. "You owe my father any money?"

"We want to *give* him some."

The door slammed shut with oaken finality. "Jackass!" muttered Jackson and began pressing the buzzer while Cooper banged the knocker. Dawes after a moment's hesitation joined in. Finally the door opened a sliver's width to let out the howling of blood-eager dogs in a distant room.

"Hear that?" warned the man inside. "You'd better get away before I sic the lot of 'em on you."

"What's going on down there?" someone shouted. "Some more of your damned women, Geoffrey. I'll sic the dogs on them."

"No, dad, just some new racket. They claim to be from some Damned Cooper Company and say they want to give us money."

"What? What? Open that door." There was a muffled thumping as someone fell down a few stairs, then a tangle of sibilant hissing. "You idiot, you stupid idiot, that's Jackson-Cooper Productions and there's gold leaf in that card!"

Cooper gently pushed the door and it swung open to reveal the sharp-nosed son, standing at the foot of a broad staircase with a bent old man in a dressing gown waving a bent yellow finger in his face. "Good day, Mr. Crakely," he said.

A lacework of fine lines spread across Crakely's face as he prepared a smile. "Won't you come in?"

"We're here to offer you money in connection with an interesting proposition."

The lines broke horrifyingly into still finer wrinkles and Crakely limped toward them, rubbing his left thigh. "Slipped—wanted to greet you people personally. A great honor." He gave Dawes a vague shake of the head. "Mr. Cooper, Mr. Jackson, have a seat, please."

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"Let's get upstairs first, father."

"What amount were you thinking of?"

"Fifty-thousand full-strength dollars."

"I don't like that. When I get money I want it right away. Full-strength dollar guarantees are only an inflation hedge on *later* payments."

"I think we'd better discuss this matter in your bedroom where you'll be comfortable," Cooper said.

"I like it here."

"Come along, Mr. Crakely," a brisk young nurse called down. She glided swiftly on her soft-soled shoes down the stairs and took him by the arm. "Better in your own room where everything is so comfy for you."

"Hmmmmm! Hmmmmm!" the old man mumbled, sucking damply at his gums, as the nurse took him into the lift. As it started up, he shouted down at them. "Don't discuss anything with that one! I handle all negotiations."

They hurried up the stairs, keeping level with him, and Jackson said, "Only proper, only fitting."

THEY reached the second floor and crept behind Crakely, now tired from his sudden exertions, to the bedroom. It was an enormous chamber filled with dark, heavy Renaissance furniture and Crakely slipped jerkily into bed, the upright pillows forming a dead-white nimbus about him. "Good color shot," Jackson whispered to Dawes.

"What? What?" he wheezed. "Now then what's the deal?"

"You're a great figure in the world of affairs," Cooper began.

"You didn't come here to tell me *that!* I know my assessed valuation."

"I'm sure you do," Cooper said admiringly. "We want to feature your life on a sixty-minute program." He went into the details while the old man contemplated the puckered joint of his left index finger through narrowing eye-slits. Crakely junior was smiling, a more juice-laden replica of his father.

Finally the old man asked cautiously. "Where are the papers?"

Dawes handed over an attache case and Cooper deftly flipped the documents from a compartment. "They're all there," he said, handing them to Crakely.

The eyes, still slitted, raced down the sheets. "Can't fool me with any fine print, Cooper, I'm up to all your tricks. You'll have to give me more than fifty thousand, I can tell you that."

"That's the standard rate," Dawes protested.

Jackson nudged him to keep quiet. Crakely caught both the remark and the nudge. He con-

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sidered Dawes contemptuously. "Don't like to see innocent-faced shills used to front a shakedown." His fingers clawed with a separate vitality of their own at the bedsheets. "Make another bid. I'm not a 'standard' subject for your show."

"Fifty-five thousand," Jackson nodded while Dawes gasped his protest.

"Are you kidding? You're talking about my death. Sixty thousand. Not a penny less."

"Fifty-six thousand," Jackson replied.

The haggling continued until the figure was settled at fifty-eight thousand. After Cooper wrote in the new cash proviso the old man insisted that everyone present sign it. As soon as he had the completed documents in his trembling hand he began cackling uncontrollably. "You fools!" he said. "I'd have settled for fifty if you'd stuck to it. You double fools! I haven't guaranteed to die—I'll see all of you in your graves."

His voice kept rising and, just as the nurse hurried in, he fell out of bed. Cooper's calm expression began to fade as Crakely got back without assistance. "See, I can manage."

They were all shooed out of the room while Crakely was locking the papers in his strongbox and warning the nurse not to pry. "We'll have to wait downstairs," Jackson explained to his son, "until the technicians arrive."

"Don't worry about that live-forever ranting," Geoffrey shrugged. "All the doctors agree. He has an automated doctor, too, of course—it's good enough even if he picked it up second hand—and we take readings twice a day. Everything, blood pressure, cell collapse rate and the rest of that stuff, they extrapolate the same date, odds of a million to one."

"Have to call New York now," Jackson said, leaving them. The younger Crakely followed to keep an eye on him.

"Got to hand it to you," Cooper said to Dawes. "You'd have saved us some money, not that a few thousand's going to be anything from now on."

"So unfair," said Dawes. "That Mr. Haley, a fine man, getting less than this rich one!"

"Justice is beside the point. The public's entitled to results," Cooper said soberly. Jackson came running back into the room. "They getting right out here?"

"In an hour but that's nothing. Haley's dead! Died a few hours ago, ahead of schedule."

"Everything all right?" Cooper asked anxiously.

"Seems to be."

"Then," Cooper grinned, eyes like unclouded full moons, "we are in business."

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WHEN they reached New York they learned that Haley's relatives wanted to respect the dying man's wishes and were pleased with both the idea of a living memorial and that of the money to be disbursed. But the reels of Haley's last hours were the greatest news of all. They showed him proceeding calmly about the minor chores of a well-automated bachelor household, studying family albums and the Bible, and generally behaving with a dignity that drew tears to Dawes' eyes.

"My parents died on a moon run," Dawes said. "Dad was going for a heart-rest and mom insisted on going along. The ship cracked up a thousand miles out from the resorts and all I have is the usual handful of home movies. If I only had this kind of keepsake."

"Did you see all those right profiles he gave us without being directed! A great guy." Cooper caught himself up short. "Like your folks were, I'm sure, Dawes."

But Jackson was looking coldly at the younger man. "We're going to have to let twenty more technicians in on some of this tonight," he said sharply. "We'll have the copyrighting showing tomorrow. Dawes, go get some sleep. You're going out tomorrow—on your own."

"I'll do my best," he said eagerly. "I'll come down in the morning for final word."

"Yes, you do that."

After he was gone Cooper demanded, "What's this about? He could have sat in tonight a while and learned something."

"He may know too much already." He handed over an envelope and sheet covered with block lettering. "I found this on the desk just now."

The message said:

Everything's under wraps at Jackson-Cooper, isn't it? You think we're such fools we can't see a raw deal coming on? You kept Dawes for a reason he's too green to see. If you don't give him a percentage of your stock as is standard for vice-presidents at other outfits, I'll spill the beans about your last full staff meeting, the way you stole some big idea from him. I've a recording of that session and will release it plus other information tomorrow morning if there is no immediate stock gift. There'll be a hundred imitators' claims the same day yours is released. Then what will happen to your exclusive rights?

An ex-employee.

"Nobody could get in with recording equipment, Jackson. It's a bluff."

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"Yes, but can we be sure? This is too big to take the smallest chance until the copyright's clinched. And how do we know our baby-faced Dawes isn't the instigator?"

Cooper began pacing the floor. Suddenly he froze and looked directly at Jackson. "How do I know you're not behind this? If we both give Dawes a slice, the two of you could outvote me."

"Very interesting you should have such ideas, Cooper, because I've been wondering the same thing about you."

"You just wait a minute—."

Jackson picked the anonymous message up and studied it again. "Of course, there's another angle. He could be on his own. Figures to make an entering wedge, then play us against each other."

Cooper shrugged. "We could always squelch that if we gave him just two and a half percent each. But there's still another angle. Whoever wrote this doesn't show any knowledge of specific details. Doesn't sound like Dawes."

"Maybe. But Dawes could be showing a finer hand than we give him credit for." He strummed the desk. "Okay, Cooper. We'll announce the stock award tonight. It'll keep the others quiet too, until copyright's over—sugar them up with hope. Not that there's much chance of a leak now—as soon as they see this stuff they're going to realize we've got the inside track on something that can pay them more than any stool-pigeon gamble."

AS Jackson predicted, the technical staff was wildly enthusiastic when it received the news later in the evening. The crews got down to work so efficiently that the two partners had a chance to take turns at catnapping while the final touches were being put on the product.

Dawes arrived bright and early for instructions and seemed completely overwhelmed by his new good fortune. "It's such an honor just to be working closely with you two and then this! It's just too much. I hope I can live up to it."

"The man you're to contact," said Cooper, blank-faced, "is a scientist in Mexico City. We'll be sending a crew this afternoon. Meanwhile, study all the documents carefully."

After Dawes was gone they exchanged nervous glances. "Can't make him out," Cooper said. "Is he really as naive as he looks?"

"What's the difference? Once this thing is taped down we'll be able to take care of him."

The minutes dragged as they kept the news machines open for any announcement of a counterclaim by some other company.

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Then at noon word came through that the Library of Congress, after a computer search for parallel claims, had conceded theirs. The principal agony was over; now their only problem was the audition.

A large crowd of institution leaders was gathered in the viewing hall when they came in and most of them were grumbling. "Haven't seen a decent item from this outfit in ten years," muttered Shouse of International AntiVirus Control. "Just what have they done for us lately?"

"They can *un*sell a product!" nodded Curby of Ultimate Vitamins. "Can you imagine anybody *un*selling in this day and age?"

"I can. Happens all the time now," said another tycoon with an especially portentous face.

The room abruptly darkened and the standard announcement flashed on screen:

Exclusive rights to the following ideas presentation was established at the Library of Congress this morning.

"Get on with the bad news!" someone shouted.

In the center of the screen a tiny line of elite type exploded into *Triumph Over Death!* The film cut suddenly to a full length shot of a figure of almost Roman dignity stretched out in neat houseclothes on a bed. "This

man," said a chocolaty-rich voice, "died one minute ago. His name is William Haley and the time is 6:07 P.M. April the 3rd, 2018. The automated doctor has not yet summoned the mortuary crew but *you* are already here! For the next hour you will experience the reality of this man's life—and death."

"My father was a good man who learned all his life from his human frailties and rose above them." As the new voice went on the camera moved in until the peaceful face, its angular features set in firm yet relaxed lines, filled the 3-D projection.

The audience burst into wild applause. "The greatest ever!" "What an approach!" "The art beyond art!" From then on the uproar was almost continuous and when the final shots came on of Haley settling into his death bed pandemonium broke loose in the hall. He slowly wrapped the extension from the automated

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doctor around his wrist and the readings, lightly superimposed over his image, showed steady decline until the unbearable second when machine and body were one in the stillness of clinical death.

"I have first rights to time!" Shouse was hollering as the lights came on.

"I was here ahead of you!" Curby broke in.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Jackson said. "There's going to be enough for everybody and this is one item where the reruns can even outstrip first runs."

His statement reassured them and they settled down to the business of dividing available situations. By five that afternoon Jackson and Cooper knew they were the biggest thing in the history of entertainment. When they finally found themselves alone they counted the time purchases over and over again, pinching the contracts to see if they were real. Jackson looked dreamily into his private horizon and said, "We didn't have to give that kid five percent. What a waste for a few hours of protection!"

"True," Cooper agreed. "But he can be useful for a while."

Now suspicion was back. "What are you trying to say, Cooper?"

"Don't start that again—if there's any dirty work around here it would have to be you."

They fell to shouting at one another until a contract, sent skidding by a flailing arm, sloshed into a puddle of scotch on the desk. Cooper pulled the document away just in time and carefully, lovingly, dried it off. "Eight million," he said, blowing a kiss at the contract. "Let's be calm, Jackson."

Jackson stood up and solemnly shook his hand. "You're right. Let the Dawes matter ride. We've got it made and nothing's upsetting this applecart."

DAWES reported in the next afternoon. "Dr. Huber's all set," he said. "Had some trouble with him, though. Talk about objectivity! He's the greatest man I've seen for it—outside of you two," he added hastily. "He says the general public's decadent, wants others to do all the thinking, and needs stronger medicine to get them back to science. He not only wants his death bed scene but a filmed clinical study of his dissection—."

"You can't do that!" Jackson shouted. "It's too complicated for the public."

"And vulgar!" Cooper chimed in. "You had no right to commit us. We two still run this company and don't you forget it."

Dawes fell back before the blast. "Of course you do, Mr. Cooper, and you, Mr. Jackson.

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He eventually fell in line. We'll have a straight formula run on Dr. Huber."

"That's better!" they mumbled.

Dawes merely looked puzzled and waited for further instructions while he dreamed about the vast house he had seen on a little side excursion coming back from Mexico City. It was set in an exclusively zoned dune area of Lake Erie. The salesman had explained how important it was for a rising young executive to have such a house even if he never got to live much in it. He could actually afford it now. After only five years in entertainment production Dawes knew he had reached a point most men never attained even at the end of their lives. What could a Haley, fine as he had been in his way, know of that much triumph?

"Don't stand there daydreaming!" snapped Jackson. "Get some sleep, Dawes. We expect you to have plenty of ideas."

THE next week was one endless series of crises. Word of mouth in the trade was now too great and they decided to give *Triumph Over Death* an immediate buildup that would be under their tight control rather than that of the rumor mongers. This brought a committee of protesting religious leaders and the pitch had to be carefully handled.

"We're giving you guys a great break," Cooper objected. "This isn't some girly show, this is a program to make the world's viewers aware of the one mystery that's at the heart of all your religions so I don't know why all the squawks."

Jackson was about to speak but Dawes, not seeming to notice, broke in ahead of him. "It's all being done in the best taste. And whenever a religious representative is present at the deathbed he reviews all the material in which he features and can cut shots of himself which he deems improper."

"Very fair," said one of the men of the cloth. "But we'll have to see some of the programs before we can be sure."

"Look," said Jackson. "Most people don't even bother with deathbed religion any more. We're offering you *more* than we have to; we want you on our side where you belong. Just watch that revival after the first programs!"

There was considerable hemming and hawing at first but eventually the committee left in a happier frame of mind than had been evident on its arrival.

"We have them where we want them," Jackson said, gleefully plunging his hands in his pockets. "Only, Cooper, don't try to sic your boy on me. I didn't like the way he interrupted me."

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"What about his interrupting *me*? I suppose that just happened to happen!"

Dawes looked at them with the puzzled expression what was almost permanent now. "I didn't know I was interrupting anybody," he said.

They gave him a look that was very frightening and, he was surprised to discover, just a little bit annoying.

THEN there was the crisis about the Crakelys. First the son, then the father, threatened to sabotage the death scene unless more money was forthcoming. The matter was finally straightened out after the lawyers warned the fifty-eight thousand would be attached if anything illegal were attempted.

But the worst of it was that April 17th came and went without Crakely fulfilling the company's great expectations. "Damn him," Cooper spluttered. "Just what he threatened—the million to one shot. Those bone-thin ones can last forever."

Jackson looked down at his own skeletal frame and smiled. "Very true," he said, "much to your undoubted regret. But don't worry—*he* can't last."

The next day Crakely did die and the shots were worth the scare of the extra wait. They showed a roomful of people spastically scurrying about to the old man's cranky commands and there were some beautiful shots that could be brought into close-up of the barely fleshed fingers grasping at sheet and air to bring the world into their private circle of death.

AT the end of the week, after another fruitful field trip, Dawes took a rest by visiting the All Sell Club which was located on the top floor of the tallest building in the city. He was feeling wonderfully exhausted. The purchase of the Lake Erie property had been completed that afternoon and everyone looked at him with respect close to awe as he entered. "Third man on the Jackson Cooper totem," a producer whispered to an account executive. "They've got the ultimate formula. We'll all be working for them soon—and glad to get crumbs from those two rats! That kid doesn't look their style."

Great men were always the victims of envy, Dawes realized, but it was odd how many times that word *rat* kept coming up among top executives in connection with Mr. Jackson and Mr. Cooper. He was going to walk out when he saw a familiar figure approaching. It was Mr. Wright who used to manage the division where he had been a mere copy assistant.

Wright saw him and headed his way, grinning broadly. He staggered once and said, "Great

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going, kid. Let's find a corner."

"Fine, Mr. Wright. You sure you want any more drinks?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

Alphonse, the head waiter, shooed some account men away from the best window and ceremoniously led them to it. As they sat down, the entire city beneath their feet, Wright muttered, "I fixed those rats!"

"What do you mean?" Dawes asked uneasily. "Do you have another job, Mr. Wright? Maybe I could get you back in."

"Uh, uh, not while they're in the saddle. Anyway, I did fix them good and you did get those shares. Figured they were picking your brains."

"*You* arranged my promotion?"

"Sort of." He described the note he had sent.

Dawes was shocked. "But they developed most of *Triumph Over Death* themselves."

"Wake up, kid. This is the twenty-first century. You got them started on it and I've seen them steal plenty from underlings and ditch them like that!" He wet his fingertips in the martini and snapped them together. "Now then, I've got a job at half the pay and I'm twice as happy."

Dawes started to get up. "I think I ought to go, Mr. Wright, and explain this to Mr. Jackson and Mr. Cooper."

Wright roared with laughter and the grey hairs of his eyebrows bristled. "They'd can you immediately, think it was some plot of yours and wouldn't believe a word. Very suspicious gentlemen." He leaned forward. "You'd lose that new place on Erie I read about— everything. What for?"

Dawes slowly sank back into his seat. He could see the magnificent house with that glittering thirty yard sweep of glass as if he were standing on the shore right now. "They do get nasty at times," he admitted.

"I knew you'd see it the right way," the other man laughed.

"Some day," said Dawes, narrowing his eyes and disregarding the laughter, "some day you'll have your old job back. You deserve the best, Mr. Wright."

TWO weeks later a backlog of eight deaths had been accumulated and the show was ready to roll. The Haley Story went over even more sensationally than anticipated and within a few days the firm was flooded with offers of death scenes at no charge. In some cases, there were even bids to pay for the privilege but Jackson sternly warned the staff, after setting an example with ten random firings, that nothing like that would be permitted. "We have a high trust," he told the great mass of new employees gathered in the company

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auditorium, "and we'll meet our social obligations. The only criterion for *Triumph Over Death* selections is public interest, or rather, *the* public interest."

Afterwards the partners took Dawes into a private conference room and announced there were going to be further changes. "Great news for you," Jackson said. "We're reorganizing all down the line, taking you out of *Triumph* and giving you a new opportunity—a detective story series."

"But there hasn't been a successful detective series in twenty years!"

Grinning, each man took one shoulder for a fatherly pat. "That's why it's a great break," said Jackson.

Dawes took a deep breath and started his counterattack. "You always valued my ideas before."

"Right," Jackson laughed, "but the *Triumph* formula is permanently fixed, can't be improved on, so your services there—."

"What a shame," Dawes broke in, "because I had some ideas for making the shows longer without losing hypo."

Both men froze in mid-laugh. "What do you mean?" demanded Cooper. "It's perfect already."

Dawes' grin went as far back as his molars. "Oh, I shouldn't bother you."

"Look here," Cooper said, "you're an employee like the rest of us and you still have five percent."

"Oh? I thought that would somehow be voted out of my hands too."

"Watch your step," Cooper persisted, "any idea you have you owe to the company."

Jackson beamed at Dawes. "Now, now, Mr. Cooper, we mustn't be hasty with this young fellow, must we? Of course, we'd like you to keep your holdings, Don—."

"Well, one idea is this," said Dawes. "You could start with the Dr. Huber stuff. He left a mass of audios detailing his medical history and you rejected all of it as too technical. But look at the understandable lines you could spread through the life record, padding out the program excitingly—'In 1978 I had a severe diabetic attack but the newly-discovered Bewley-Barton method cured me of it. Unfortunately, this technique, not perfected then, brought on an equally severe, mysterious attack of hepatitis in 1979. This was completely eliminated by Cranston's new Electrochemical Fix which led to a dangerous lung condition. When the lung condition responded to treatment a side effect reactivated the diabetes as well as an old case of rheumatic fever, etcetera, etcetera' until the final statement, 'at this point lungs, endocrine system and

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blood circulation all began to collapse simultaneously despite the excellent medical care received.' "

Jackson rubbed his chin. Cooper followed suit. Neither spoke.

"Get the point? Huber's experience is what happens to everybody one way or another. Well, since the days of medicine men there's been nothing the public likes better than a hefty string of disease names. Sciatica, lumbago, tuberculosis, arthritis, rheumatism, nephritis—millions of elderly ladies openly tremble in delighted terror and the men do, too, on the sly. It's the supreme popular poetry!"

"It's a hypo worth considering," Jackson said. "Uh—what about your other ideas?"

"Absolutely not," Dawes shook his head. "I'd only discuss them as the problems arose. Your time's too valuable to waste."

"We might as well keep you on *Triumph* since you're so interested in it," said Cooper.

"Right," agreed his partner, "we didn't realize you wanted to stay there so badly. And now, what are those other ideas? We have plenty of time to listen."

A touch of shrewdness came into Dawes' open face that they had never seen there before. "As I said, gentlemen, they should wait for the proper context. The good of our company must come first."

IT HAD been a close call and from then on, he knew, he would have to be very careful if he wanted to hold on to everything he had gained—the blessings of wide private spaces in a greatly crowded world and of a respect that he felt wherever men of affairs recognized him. A few times he indicated passing approval for an idea of Jackson's against one of Cooper's or vice versa, just enough to keep them from effectively joining forces.

With each passing week the stakes became higher. Producing houses that in some cases went back to the medium's beginning collapsed one by one and were absorbed at bargain rates into Jackson-Cooper. The ratings did not go up any more only because they were already close to mass saturation but time segments did keep increasing. People, it seemed, could watch other people dying all day long.

There were, as always, a few disgruntled intellectuals, pointing with alarm at the fact that a small, if growing, minority of watchers were developing *accidie;* which, it turned out, simply meant despair of living. But the mainstream of experts quickly replied to these Cassandras by showing the viewing majority had found renewed interest in life's pleasures and labors. And even if this *accidie* did spread, it couldn't threaten the ratings

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since these were the very people who watched *every* rerun series.

But one night about the twentieth week of *Triumph* something happened to shake Dawes more seriously. He had been feeling odd for a few days and when he applied the automated doctor it indicated very slight traces of Moleculide poisoning in his system. It also reported that he would have been dead by now if his resistance were not somewhat above average. He had been wondering the past several nights why his three bedtime shots of scotch (a habit only recently acquired) tasted so much better than before and now a quick analysis revealed the scotch as the source of the poison. To top things off he found a 3-D taper hidden in his bedroom wall.

The next day he came to the office with the taper. He greeted the two men as if nothing had happened and they looked at him with poker-tight faces but he made certain they saw him pull the tape and destroy it. "An experiment that failed," he said offhandedly.

Jackson gave him a tiny, refined smile as if he were holding seed pearls between his lips. "I'm glad I had nothing to do with it," he said. "I hate to be connected with failure."

"Well, *I* certainly can say the same," Cooper glared back.

To which Dawes managed to return a smile even smaller than Jackson's.

BUT the same afternoon he contacted Wright and arranged a meeting for that night. He approached Wright's building by an extremely circuitous route; it gave him at least a chance to slip away from the investigators who must be trailing him.

"What's the great mystery?" Wright wanted to know. He peered at him for a moment. "You look kind of different."

"I don't see why," Dawes said stiffly. Then he told him what had happened.

"Now you know what they're like anyway," Wright nodded.

"I've known that for a while. But I'm not interested in a lot of idle moralizing and speculation at this point. I don't think they'll try anything right away but eventually they will. And next time they'll be a lot smarter. Wright, I need someone I can trust. I'd like to make you my aide."

Wright frowned thoughtfully. "You know, for a minute there you almost looked like them." He rubbed his eyes. "Wouldn't they fight my coming in?"

Dawes' jaw tightened. "Maybe, but I know how to hit back now. I'd get my way."

"I'll bet you would. Well, it's a big promotion all right."

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"We're the biggest thing outside the presidency itself. You know there's nothing bigger than entertainment and we're spreading all over the place. Okay then, there are only two people bigger than me right now." His voice softened. "You'd be a good influence up there, raise the moral tone."

Wright considered him a while. "Still so young, too."

"I don't see what that—."

"No, I won't take it, Don," he said firmly.

"But why not? Look, you can't expect me to plead with you."

"No, I wouldn't expect it. This has nothing to do with your being younger than me but I'm afraid taking the position wouldn't make any difference for you now."

"That's the rottenest thing I've ever heard!" Dawes snapped. "Don't bother to show me the door. I made certain I knew where it was when I came in."

FOR a few days Wright's mystifying words rankled him but there was too much important work to be done to mull over the ideas of someone who was obviously failure-prone and neurotically proud of it.

And there was the crucial need to keep an eye on Jackson and Cooper whenever possible.

Then one night Cooper called him frantically on the videophone. "Come right over," he said. "Look, Dawes, don't hesitate like that. If you're afraid bring all the people you want. It would be better for the three of us to thrash this out alone but just make sure you get here right away."

"I'll bring my chauffer up with me," he lied. It wouldn't hurt to confuse any underhanded planning but, judging by what he had seen, Cooper for once really meant what he was saying.

On the way up in the elevator he met Jackson whose shaky hands belied the calm expression on his face. "Know what's wrong?" Dawes asked.

"No. Except that he did say he's sick. Something about the automated doctor."

When they saw Cooper in the bedroom, though, he looked anything but immobilized. He was pacing wildly back and forth, and near his bureau was a dog stretched stiffly on the floor. "Nelson is dead!" he shouted. "You wouldn't even stop at a dog, Jackson, would you?" Tears were streaming down his face. "That's the best dog that ever lived."

"I don't know what I have to do with it," Jackson said, very nervous.

Cooper whirled, eyes out like knobs, toward Dawes. "You're

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no good either but you're an angel compared to that one. I want you to be my witness. Nelson saved my life tonight, Dawes. That's right, sacrificed his life for me. See, Jackson's so pale you'd think he was the dead one."

"But how could a dog—," protested Dawes.

Cooper stroked the brown-spotted terrier as if he were awakening him from sleep. "Nelson wasn't feeling very well this evening, whimpering. So I attached the automated doctor to his chest to get a reading. When I went over to the console and turned it on it electrocuted him! Now, you know as well as I do that it's impossible for the instrument to harm anyone unless it's been tampered with." He held up a miniature transmode bar. "It *was* tampered with. This jumped all the dozens of power safeguards and it was intended for me. And that's not all!" He pulled a disconnected taper from its hiding place in the wall. "This was busy recording my programmed death. He was going to get a show out of it, cook up some story about my wanting this last honor, respecting the wishes of the honorable suicide!"

Dawes stared at the taper. It fit easily into the center of Cooper's palm, the Jewel model which was the smallest ever developed. "Only a few people have Jewels," he said, glancing at the gauge reading. Most of the tape was still unused.

"Exactly! It's Jackson's work all right."

Jackson ran up to Cooper and grabbed him by the arm. "All right," he said, "why don't you tell our young friend how you had my apartment taped the other day and tried to have me Moleculided?"

"You were the one who always stole the ideas," Cooper shouted back. "There was the kid with the musical productions thirteen years ago. You bled his brain white, had him fired, blackballed him when I wanted to keep him on the payroll."

Dawes hastily opened the taper and withdrew the used run, then substituted one of the empty pickup reels. He flicked the hair switch on, slipped the device back in it's hidng place and stepped out of camera range.

"*You're* the one," Jackson was shrieking, still gripping the arm, "you're the one who needled Mr. Ralphson into a heart attack thirty years ago after he made us junior partners."

"But who planned it all?"

Their charges flew back and forth and they began shoving each other around the room. Dawes watched them nervously, hoping they wouldn't get out of taper range. He relaxed as they circled back, raining blows on each other's head. Cooper picked

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up an ashtray. "You're finished, Jackson," he said. "Dawes will testify you went beserk and this," he slammed him stunningly on the head, "was the only way to stop you. Why shouldn't he? He's getting your share."

"The shoe's on the other foot," Jackson said groggily, gathering enough strength to lunge a lamp stand into his jaw.

THEY both fell to the floor, unconscious. Dawes quickly took the taper from the wall again, withdrew the incriminating reel and then put the needle-holed device, reloaded, back. After he pocketed the tape he calmly attached the repaired automated doctor to Jackson's neck and took a synthesized reading, at the same time setting the doctor for central hospital alarm. There was no indication of incipient death but that wasn't too unfortunate; with the record of the quarrel in his pocket he could always control Jackson and certainly would get the needed shares. He unwound the doctor attachment and put it on Cooper's neck. There he had a purer form of luck. It indicated Cooper was almost totally paralyzed and would die within twelve hours. He was so far beyond saving that there would be no reason for the medical crew to shift him to the hospital.

Dawes stood up and leaned against the wall to await the crew's arrival. He was, he decided, incredibly lucky, so lucky that it was bound to last him all his long life. If Cooper and Jackson had been in reversed roles he could not be assured of a taper death scene record since it was not Jackson's apartment. Meanwhile, Jackson's living on would assure a smooth transfer of power, a 'voluntary' one.

Then, too, he was lucky not to have had Wright in his confidence. It would have been so unnecessary and he could hire all the young idea people he would ever need, people he would always know how to control. He wanted to cry out in the loudest hard sell voice available: *I'm on top of the heap, all by myself!* but it wouldn't do while the taper was on. A man really had to know at every step of the way how to keep an eye on himself.

As he turned back toward the two men on the floor he was momentarily startled to find Cooper's eyes staring unbelievingly up at him as if they belonged to another recording taper; but then he remembered the automatic doctor's categorical indication of almost total paralysis from now until death and turned again to the taper to make certain it was set to miss nothing, including those glittering eyes.

THE END

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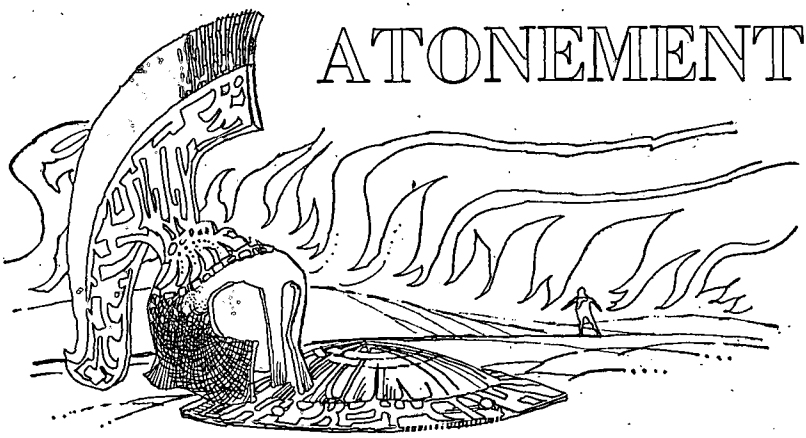
The priests of Time chanted the rituals, and Thirlu went on the long pilgrimage. Only thus could the inheritors of an ancient sin make their . . .

ATONEMENT



By JESSE ROARKE

Illustrator SUMMERS

THEY sat together in their sorrow. He held her close, and she whispered to him, like the breath of the dying year.

"Oh, Thirlu!" she said. "You must have made a mistake. It is only your imagination, my darling!"

He shuddered, like a dry leaf in the winds of autumn.

"It is no mistake, my dear one", he replied. "There is nothing like that terrible chill, and when it comes, one knows. It is farewell, Grenda, my life!"

They sat in silence, clinging to one another. He was sixteen, and she was a year and a day younger than he. Early marriages were encouraged, in this postadustian world; indeed, no one, by law, could pass unmarried the age of eighteen. And still the melancholy was over the land, and the rate of birth was declining. Still the trees and the streams were gone, and the ground was parched and seared, save in a few oases. Only small, isolated pockets of humanity,

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like this of Helmevu, survived.

The leaves were stirring slightly; a bird sang. Into the patch of sunlight their child crawled, their little son, Threndalco. He seemed normal to the glance, but gave slight pause to the more attentive regard. There was something different, some shade, some tendency: the hair was not quite right, the carriage was a little awry, the eyes now and then took on, slightly, a febrile glittering. Even to the fond parents, the truth would soon become plain.

"Poor baby!" said Thirlu. "Poor world! What is to become of us, Grenda? What can become of us? It is so many years now, so long past remembrance, and nothing has changed! Nothing, except that we grow fewer, hope dwindles, the curse takes longer and longer to complete its terrible change! Our sorrow increases, and this is the only change."

Dumbly she buried her head in his bosom, and clung to him tighter still. The baby crawled ever so little crookedly, and its small cry struck terror into these listening hearts.

"Oh, it is so unfair!" she cried. "Why are we tormented?"

"We are descended from the tormentors", he replied, "from those who twisted and tortured themselves and the world. This seems reason enough. Their sins are upon us, as long as we live."

"But it will end! Surely there will be expiation, some day!"

"We can only hope, and do as we must. I cannot escape the law, the necessity. And I do not wish to, since it would only add to the grim weight that is upon us. My duty, my destiny is clear, and I must perform it, must meet it. These must be our last moments. There will be no more embraces for us, my darling, ever again."

"I cannot bear to part from you!" she sobbed.

"You can, you know you can", he replied, gently stroking her hair. "And you must. At most you will suffer for a night, and a little more; then I, our love, our marriage, our baby, will never have been, and you will be free for more happiness than I can give you. You will be disturbed by no memories, either of pleasure or of pain, for one cannot remember something which has never existed."

And so they sat together through the long but all too short afternoon. As the shadows lengthened, he tenderly disengaged himself, and stood facing the sunset.

"Farewell", he said. "Go quickly, and do not look back."

She took up the feeble and unprotesting baby and left him, weeping brokenly. He walked alone into the forest.

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ALL NIGHT, fasting, prayerfully he wandered among the silent trees. He asked fervently for forgiveness, he begged that he be allowed to take the whole sin upon him, to atone for it all, however great might be his pain. But if an answer was given him, he did not hear it. He walked on in silence, and prayed, and thought. The old world must have been so beautiful, if this little portion of it shone with such natural favor. Why had things been as they had been? Had there always been a curse upon it all, that blighted the fairest smiling? He shuddered, thinking of the seemingly ineradicable scars. What terrible explosion, what force of fire, the unhuman must have wielded, to have made such desolation! It was a pity, that they had not all been killed. Why must a few survive, deadened, giving birth to monstrosities? It had been almost universal, in the early succeeding days; and it hung on still, a black pall to their brightest moments. He prayed again that it might be ended, that he might be an instrument to this consummation, this rebeginning of life. And the silence answered him; and so he passed the whole of the dark night, alone in the forest.

WITH the first morning rays of white gold, again the chill. It brought him to his knees, it twisted his heart, his whole being, into one stifled cry. He arose, and went, resolutely, on his not to be avoided way. Praising God, the priests, and all that was, had been, and might be, he followed his fate, the beckoning, the probing finger that would never desert him, or let him go. Fey he went through the forest and through the fields, approaching the appointed grove.

The priests had also been awake through the night, praying, and making whatever other preparations might be required. He thought of them with a swelling of his breast. It was a great thing, that they could do what they could do, that they had such power. It was said that in the old prideful days men had looked to external things alone, and had stifled their inner powers beyond discovery. Then the teeming multitudes, forging their doom in their self-opinionated ignorance, scoffed bitterly at any idea of human greatness, at all real profundity or worthy aspiration: they built up little things, and tore down all that was worth while. The finger probed, he shuddered. Before he went, would he learn why he was the heir of such men? Would he ever understand things? Or were the priests only groping also, but a little ahead? They said that this was the fact, and reluctantly, as duty-bound, he believed them:

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but might there not be more? Might there not be a sudden breaking through? Even though it might be small, in the face of Trust, the priests' ability above the old measure, would seem to augur something, some hope, some possibility of joy.

But he could not feel it. He continued to plod, mechanically and yet purposefully, ahead. He thought of stories he had heard of great divisions in the old world, of the East and the West. It was said that the East had been wiser, that it had accomplished more in the spirit, that its best achievements had resisted the encroachments of the technological barbarians: it was said that the West had gradually been leavening its grossness a little, through contact with its greater neighbor. But it had not been enough, or there had not been enough time, and the terrible fires had fallen. He wondered if the East had survived, if the non-materialists still flourished in the world, and taught the utter peace, the full assurance, the immortality. But the speculation was idle. He was here, and there was no travel for him, on this plane. His was a longer and a more melancholy journey. The chill became a vastness, the finger a hand, that squeezed hard; tranquilly, fervently he trod across the green grass, approached the priests with reverence.

THEY received him in silence, gave him a ritual bath, censed and perfumed him. They burned his tunic, prayerfully, and dressed him anew: the greaves, the corselet and the helmet puzzled him, and he understood as little the shield and the spear, the sword and the bow and arrows. But he would know, in time. He stood firmly, and waited.

Within the ring of trees he stood, surrounded by a ring of priests. And then the High Priest came forward, laid firm hands upon his shoulders, and stared into his eyes. He was drowsy, and the chant of the High Priest he scarcely heard.

Low and vibrant it rang on the still air:

O unfathomable mystery of Time! Let it be, if it may be, that your full truth, your treasure, shall enlighten men. Let there vanish, in your fullness, all the erratic courses of this world. Let it be acceptable, this sacrifice, this atonement! Let the bloodlust, the suffering remain behind, O Time! Let it be drowned. O may you wash over the madness of this world and give birth to the straight, the clean. May it be so, that you double on yourself, and swallow the unworthy: may they come not again, for plague and pain. Let it be, that we pierce and encompass you, O Time! O God that is, free us, give us thine eternity! May this

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youth come to you. Accept his sacrifice, let his immortal portion dwell high, in light forever. Let the world be free: let humanity be one great co-operation, unwarped, undarkened. Let there be no further stupid rivalries and clashes. Let the best be made manifest, and the worst expunged, forever.

O Peace and Truth! O Atonement! O Time!

O Great God! O Atonement! O Peace! Truth! O Time!

Time! O Time!

Thus long it continued, though soon he no longer heard it. It continued until his body vanished, and his misshapen child was no more.

HE AWOKE in camp, on the windy plain of Dardanus. There was no such person as Thirlu, and Helmevu was not even a memory. His name was Gorgythion, and he was one of the fifty sons of Priam: his mother was Kastianeira. She was from Aisyme, and she was as lovely and fair as a goddess, almost as beautiful as Helen herself. He had inherited much of her beauty, and all of his father's manliness.

He was a splendid figure, standing almost indolently on the plain, in the midst of the battle. The Greeks were hard pressed about their ships, and the Trojans, led by Hektor, were pursuing the advantage fiercely. Gorgythion poised his spear, and sought an opening. Almost dreamily he stood, defending his city, athirst for glory.

Among the Greeks, the wiry little bowman Teukros was hiding behind the great shield of the giant Aias, his half brother. Whenever he saw a good target, he ran out from behind the shield, shot, and ran back again, like a child to its mother. His arrows never missed, and he had just been praised by Agamemnon for his good work, and promised especial honor upon the sacking of the city. Swelling with pride, he leered down the shaft at Hektor himself, and loosed the string. But Hektor's doom had not ripened. The bitter arrow clove the air, and passed over the shoulder of the mainstay of Troy.

Gorgythion lowered his spear and surveyed the scene. He would not waste a cast. Dreamily he stood, and he hardly changed expression when the unwasteful Greek shaft buried itself in his breast. He almost smiled, as his head sank to his shoulder, slowly, like a garden poppy in full bloom, heavy with spring showers. Under his glistening helmet his head sank like a flower: and like he slowly sank to the ground, and lay still, the bloom hovering yet upon him.

THE END

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The EMPATHIC MAN

By GORDON BROWNE

Illustrator SUMMERS

He always identified with the underdog.

And when he identified, he identified.

THERE was the wretched couch he had always heard about. Fortunately, there was another chair, too, opposite the doctor's. He lowered himself carefully into that.

"I want you to understand, Dr. Fenderstone," he said, "I'm not at all sure that you are what I need—that is, that mine is a psychiatric problem. As a matter of fact—"

"Why don't you just tell me about it, and then we can see what's involved?"

"Well, of course, if you wish."

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That seemed rather abrupt, not permitting him even to finish his sentence. If he were not in such hideous danger, he would just call off the whole business and leave. But his mother was right. Where else could he turn?

"Well, I'm a bachelor. I live with my mother. She's the one who insisted I come to you. I'm not at all sure—I guess I've said that."

He was not balmy—or neurotic or psychotic or whatever they called it! He must tell this carefully. The wrong sort of person could so easily twist his story to make him sound like a real lunatic.

"I understand in this psychiatric business you like to look back into a person's life. I should tell you, then, that I've always had this—well, this special feeling for the underdog. I mean—it almost seems sometimes as if our whole world is made up of attackers and victims—that everything preys on something, that each person preys on someone or something else. I don't know if you see what I mean, but—well, like being cruel to someone just because he isn't strong enough to protect himself—that sort of thing—it upsets me terribly, always has. I can remember when I was a child—"

He paused. The doctor was not taking notes or anything, just sitting there watching him and listening. His own chair was beside the window. It was a comfort as long as he had to tell all this to be able to look out the half-opened window while he talked and watch the sky above and the traffic far below and the window washer opposite him on the office building across the street. It was better than facing the doctor. A very quiet, rather odd-looking fellow, he was. Younger than he had expected.

"Yes?" the doctor prompted.

"H'mm?"

"You started to speak of something that happened when you were a child."

He could not think what. He shrugged. "Oh, nothing really. Just that I had this strong feeling always about injustice and—and cruelty to the weak. I always sort of identified myself with the victim, you see, and I'd think how he must be feeling, and it would make me miserable unless I could help him."

HE WAITED, but the doctor made no comment. He hurried on. "This all came to a head last week, Wednesday night, as a matter of fact. I was coming home from work on the subway, and I was sitting—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Munson, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm in the insurance business." He was probably trying to figure his fee. He would get little

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help here, from this distant, passionless doctor. Imagine an office without a single painting on the walls!

"Go on."

"Oh, yes. Well, as I was saying, I was sitting between two Negro women, domestics apparently from their conversation, and they were talking back and forth across me. The woman on my left, a huge, fat, very black woman, was telling her friend that she had lost her job that very day. She was much distressed, for her husband was out of work, and her youngest daughter was hospitalized for some reason. It seemed that her employer had a worthless son, a boy of sixteen who was in constant trouble. His mother, however, could find no fault in him. On this occasion, he had taken a large sum of money from his mother's purse and, when the loss was discovered, had promptly accused the maid, my subway companion, of stealing it. That foolish mother dismissed her on the spot without listening to so much as a word of protest or explanation."

The doctor registered no reaction at all. His face was like an elaborate, uninteresting mask. It must be part of their training to take this unastonished attitude toward anything that was said to them.

"I was incensed, of course, at what I had overheard and deeply troubled by the plight of the poor soul. Her employer had refused even to give her a reference. I searched my mind for a way to assist her. When, at length, she began to weep, I impulsively laid a comforting hand on her arm."

He looked quickly away from the doctor and out the window, hesitating. There was no way but to plunge ahead.

"She was surprised, of course, at this gesture from a stranger, but I hastened to express my sympathy. As I did so, I chanced to look down at my hand, resting on her arm just above her wrist and hand. Mine appeared as black as hers."

For just a moment the hot flash of his earlier fear swept him. He did not look at the doctor but hurried on.

"In a foolish panic I leaped off the train at the next station. Then, standing on the platform, I held my hands up under the bright station lights. Of course, they were as white as ever. It had been just an illusion, caused probably by the poor lighting in the swaying train, but it had been startlingly real."

On the window ledge outside a small black and brown spider was constructing a web, moving busily along its self-made paths. The window washer across the way had moved almost out of sight to his right.

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WITH a noisy scratching and flare, the doctor lit his pipe with a kitchen match. "Was this the only illusion of this sort you experienced?"

"No." Now he must speak quickly and not think of what he said, for when he thought about it—He mopped at his forehead, then stroked slowly along his jaw and chin. "I found I was near the park. I thought a walk would be soothing. Almost immediately, however, I came upon a crying child, a small girl. She was standing in one of the gravel paths, blood dripping from a scrape on her knee, crying her heart out. Naturally, I tried to comfort her. She told me she had helped her mother all afternoon in order to earn a fifty cent piece so that she could go to the movies. Her hoodlum brother, a big eighteen-year-old, had offered to walk her to the theater, then had knocked her down, stolen her money, and run off with some of his worthless cronies!"

The pathetic helplessness and desolation of the child defied description. He could still see her, knee dripping, knuckling her wet eyes, while the breeze blew her dark, rumpled hair about her pale cheeks. Shaking his head, he looked to the window sill again. The spider had completed a handsome web. The window washer had disappeared. Traffic noise below was muffled.

"Yes?" the doctor pressed on.

There was a growing tightness in his chest. He was extremely hot. "I helped her to a water fountain where I dipped my handkerchief in the water and washed off her knee. Her disappointment and frustration wrung my heart. At last I told her that I would give her fifty cents to make up for the money she had lost. She was delighted! Imagine my chagrin, then, when I reached for my money and it wasn't there! Neither change nor bills! My pockets had been picked! I was furious! At last the poor child went sadly off, while I sat on the bench, wondering how I could get home without money but especially vexed that I had been unable to help her. Suddenly I observed a brown stain on my trousers. I pulled up my pants leg and found a nasty scrape, caused apparently when I knelt to assist the child. But even as I thought that, another, more frightening idea began to grow in my mind."

The doctor was watching him closely, the lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses magnifying his attentive dark eyes. He looked away again to the window sill where the finished spider web glistened, though the spider itself had disappeared.

He went on talking, trying to think only about the web or the window washer of the tall build-

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ing across the street or almost anything else. "I am not a Catholic, but, of course, I know of the phenomenon of the Stigmata. I've read, too, of some of the ancient Eastern beliefs about transmigration and similar phenomena. I began to feel a little panicky. I hurried along a walk leading out of the park when I suddenly came upon a refreshment stand. I was famished. Without thinking, I ordered a hamburger. Only when it was served did I remember I had no money. I reached into my pocket, just to be sure. My money was there. All of it! Every penny! Then, fumbling, I bent to look at my knee. There was no trace of a scrape on it anywhere!"

Involuntarily, he touched his knee, then shuddered. The doctor seemed not to notice.

HE TOOK a deep breath. "I plunged down a walk, almost running, I knew not where! At last I stopped to get my bearings, then walked on more slowly, eating my hamburger, for, though terrified, I was still hungry. I had just recognized the place where I was by the tops of the buildings I could see above the trees when I came upon a special exhibit. It was a children's zoo where all the familiar farm animals were displayed for the benefit of the city children. It was a dismal affair, unimaginatively planned in the first place and now permitted to grow filthy and run down. Flies swarmed everywhere, and the stench of untended stalls was overpowering. In a pen near the walk, a bony, fly-covered Guernsey cow submitted with desperate patience to being milked by an unshaven, brutish-looking youth in dirty coveralls. In the next pen, bellowing piteously, was the cows calf. Periodically it would push against the gate between their pens, then bellow and roll its eyes, pleading for anyone who could to let it get to its mother for nursing. The lout who was doing the milking ignored it, but occasionally the poor cow would turn its head toward the calf, lowing softly. As if that weren't enough, a group of half a dozen small boys stood just outside the calf's pen, tormenting it, pelting it with gravel from the path, with twigs, with anything they could throw."

He paused as nausea swept him, then receded. On the window sill, a sun-lazy fly walked slowly back and forth. The spider web glistened. Across from him the doctor smoked on, unperturbed.

He twisted in the chair but could find no comfortable position. "For just a moment I watched, horror-struck by the scene. The cow rolled its eyes toward me as if pleading for my

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help. I thrust the last bite of my hamburger into my mouth and rushed forward, but I was suddenly seized with terrible gagging and choking. I could not possibly have swallowed that hamburger! I had seen into that cow's eyes, into the eyes of that poor, tormented calf! I ran to a rubbish barrel and spat out that cursed sandwich. To think—all the times I have eaten beef! Then I rushed, scolding, at the boys who were flinging the rubbish at the calf!"

He was shaking and could not keep his voice steady. The doctor was poking at the bowl of his pipe with a match stick but watching him. He lowered his eyes, then had to look away from his trembling hands to the window. The fly had tangled one wing and several feet in the web. He closed his eyes.

"Yes?" the doctor said.

" 'Yes?' " he bellowed. "Is that all you have to say? What in God's name are you made of? Can't you say anything but 'Yes'?"

The doctor shifted his position, stretching his legs slightly, then crossing his knees. "I'd rather not comment until I've heard your whole story."

HE LOWERED his head, watching his hands twisting in his lap. "All right. When I first charged at those boys, they jeered and scoffed, but, then, as I drew nearer, they stood staring stupidly. Suddenly they turned and ran, shrieking in fear. I leaned over the fence, tears running down my face, and cradled the head of that poor calf in my arms. My hands stroked across its forehead. Then my hands—" He choked, dizzy with the fear that washed over him in huge, continuous waves. "My hands were covered with—with short, coarse hair—just like the hair on the calf's nose!"

He was near collapse. How could he tell the rest? He mopped hastily at his face with a handkerchief. The doctor simply sat there, like a great lump, watching him suffer. He looked out the window. The spider had reappeared and was moving slowly toward the fly, still struggling to free itself.

"I staggered back in horror and raised my hands to my face! My cheeks were hairy, too! I ran frantically from the park and leaped into a cab. Giving my address, I shrank down in the back seat, shaking. When I arrived home, I raced straight into the bathroom and took off all my clothes. My entire body was covered with coarse, wiry hair!"

He was sobbing. The doctor gave him a box of tissues. After a time his crying eased. He struggled for control.

(*Continued on page 130*)

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(*continued from page 6*)

Bunch, in spite of Mr. Greco's press-agenting. Perhaps Mr. Greco believes that David Bunch's fugitive from a can opener compares with the masks worn in "The Great God Brown"? All my life I have heard and read the wonderful plaudits of critics of both playwrights and studied their works in school, but I hardly think any of our six grandchildren will ever even hear of David Bunch.

As for Mr. Greco's "sincere desire" that I reevaluate the worth of constructive criticism, please inform him that there is no need for a reevaluation, since I have always had a high respect for it. My opinion is, however, that the only *constructive* criticism of the work of Mr. Bunch is that it would be better not written. That would be a definite improvement! I believe I am not alone in that opinion, since after I broke the ice, so to speak, you have had a few more adverse criticisms of his work. In fact, I don't recall ever having seen any mention whatever of his writing until I started the ball rolling. And Mr. Greco is right in intimating that it was "extreme condemnation". Definitely! Regardless of any hidden meanings or purposes, the stories, in my opinion, are just wastebasket material and not worthy of the time, effort and material it took to publish them and/or read them. There is too much good fiction—at any rate, *better*—written for us to have to put up with such inferior efforts. Perhaps there is a field of fiction in which Mr. Bunch's material might be acceptable, or even outstanding, but I do not believe FANTASTIC should be classed in the same category. And I still believe that it would take a psychopath, or near-psychopath, both to write and to enjoy that type of story. I have no quarrel with Mr. Greco if he wants to place himself in the group. Let him grab up his lance and fly to the rescue of his imperiled hero if he wishes, but please, please don't inflict any more of said "hero's" writings upon us.

Mrs. Alvin A. Stewart
Rt. 2, Box 64-A
San Saba, Texas

● *Don't feel too badly, Mr. Bunch. A lot of folks didn't like "The Great God Brown" when that was written, either. Seems to us both prosecution and defense have had their say in the matter of Fans vs. Bunch. The Court (that's us) reserves decision.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I would like to say in front, as it were, that in my opinion your magazine has been improving steadily over the last year or so. It is now one of the ones that I

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look for on the newstands, which was not true even six months ago. One of the reasons for this is the high number of good and passably good serials you have been publishing. I did not used to like serials in magazines devoted to my favorite reading stuff. Waste of space and time, I used to say. That was in the good old days when you could get a couple of good sf novels by walking down to the corner drug store. Alas, those days are gone, let us hope not forever. Now I welcome novels anyway I can get them. At this point I will say that your latest, "Magnanthropus," was, if not excellent, at least fully adequate. Keep them at that level and you will have my 35¢ every month.

Now to the rest of the issue. The cover was fine tho I'll admit that I did wonder who all those people herding the animals were. Was finally forced to conclude that they were the 30 androids mentioned at the end.

Interior illustration were adequate to good, none really gripping. Finlay by far the best, but that is no surprise.

Possibly the most chilling thing in the issue was the editorial. Brrr, what an idea. What are the automated space goers going to do when their space going days are over? Do the scientists in question really think that they can put people through this sort of thing and have their sanity survive? Even for the duration of the voyage? This setup sounds to me like it was *planned* to drive people crazy. Drugs and all.

Reading over the letter column I find that I seem to take exception to a number of Mr. Dixon's statements. In the first place I do not understand this 'larger than life' bit; how many Grey Mousers does Mr. Dixon know? The Grey Mouser seems to me qualitatively if not quantitatively somewhat larger than life size. Maybe my friends are just very dull. And I would be willing to bet on Fafhrd against Tarzan of John Carter—in fact I'd consider the probable odds a good risk. Secondly I am truly astonished to find either Leiber or de Camp mentioned for top honors in the fantasy field. Has Mr. Dixon ever read either *Titus Groan* or the Ring Trilogy? Surely he has read *Alice in Wonderland?* Any of these are in a class light-years above the forementioned epics, good though they are.

Mr. Dixon, can *you* explain yourself?

Pat Scott
Box 401
Anacortes, Wash.

● *Interesting you should mention* Titus Groan. *I have it on my bookshelf, have re-read it often, and wonder why no one*

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else seems ever to have heard of it. But isn't it more Gothic horror fantasy than SF? What say, Mr. Dixon?

Dear Editor:

When I picked up the September FANTISTIC, the Finlay illos attracted my attention to "Magnanthropus" so I started that first. Then, after I finished that first installment, I sat back, astonished at the magnificence of this story, and at once cut out the subscription blank and sent it in. What a story! This is beyond doubt the finest story that FANTASTIC has *ever* presented. I am now eagerly awaiting the next installment. This is a story of a quality equal to that of the old classics, a story that could very easily have stepped right out of the page of an old WEIRD or Munsey Mag of the Golden Age. Really a great story!

Well, I'm not going to go off the deep end this time and predict a new Golden Age, like I did when you published Kelleam's "Hunters Out of Space" in AMAZING. Not yet, anyway. But I have subscribed, which shows that I do have a good deal of faith in you, after all the fine issues you've put out recently, and next month's line-up is very encouraging, with both Banister and Joseph E. Kelleam in one issue. "Deluge II" to be the most talked-about story of 1961—with *those* two in the running? That will take some doing, and from what I've seen of his work in the past, Young isn't up to it.

I am, however, very encouraged to see Banister's fine novel. As I said before, this is the best story you have *ever* had in FANTASTIC, and the best in either of your mags since Kelleam's splendid "Hunters Out of Space" in the May '60 AMAZING. It is extremely encouraging to see that there *are* writers who can produce stories of Golden Age Quality.

Greco's letter makes me laugh. Bunch isn't really a bad writer, it's just that we aren't intelligent enough to understand him, is that what you're trying to say, Greco? Rot. It's an artist's job, not only to *create* beauty, but also to communicate it to others. This business about "my works are too good for the masses" always struck me as being a case of "the Emporers New Clothes" anyway. I *have* enjoyed a Bunch tale or two—"The Last Zero" and "We Regret"—but out of the large number he has written this seems like a rather small total.

Paul Zimmer
R. D. 1
East Greenbush, N. Y.

● *"Magnanthropus" and "Second Ending" are now running neck and neck in the mailbag for the fans' favorite fantasy novel of the year.*

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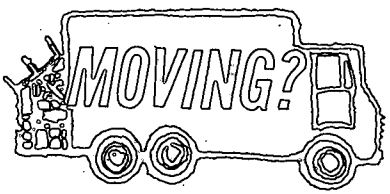

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Dear Editor:

Having just started my subscription to FANTASTIC, I received the July, August, September, and October issues within a one week period, and that is a lot of "Fantasy". I started my subscription because I wanted to make sure I got the second installment of "Second Ending." This is the first serial I have read that finished better than it started. Normally a serial if good, whets the appetite for the next installment which is usually disappointing because it can not live-up to the expectancy built-up over the preceding month. But "Second Ending" really came through. I read the first installment in May, and the second in September, and the second was better that the first. Let's have more stories by James White.

Then came the September issue with Magnanthropus. I thought it was great, "too bad," I figured, "that the conclusion won't live-up to the first part." Then the conclusion turned out even better than the first installment. That makes quite a score, two in a row.

I hope the rest of my subscription is as good as the first four.

Jim Pomykacz
7103 Agatite
Chicago 31, Illinois

○ *Amen.*

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Dear Editor:

Magnanthropus was a disappointment. I like good science fantasy, but this was fantastic to the point of being a fairy tale. For one thing, I just can't believe that anything resembling man could evoke into beings so dissimilar and unhumanoid as the butterflylike Eeina and the spiderlike Sea People, even under the influence of radiation. For another thing, Banister does not convincingly explain why Toby should mature from boyhood to manhood in such a short time. If growth rates on Eloraspon were speeded up, why wasn't anyone else affected? All in all, *Magnanthropus* was a complete letdown after White's brilliant *Second Ending*. I actually liked *Second Ending* so much that I intend nominating it for the Hugo for Best SF Novel of 1961. It most definitely deserves a place up there on the official nomination ballot.

Frederick Patten
5156 Chesley Ave.
Los Angeles 43, Calif.

● *Fantasy never needs a defense, in our opinion. But just for the* Magnanthropus *record: 1) it's possible the cataclysms affected Toby's hormonal development, 2) did you ever think two mammals as unlike as man and cow could evolve from that primeval shrew-like mammal?*

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(Continued from page 122)

The doctor waited until he was quiet, then asked, "What did you do then?"

"I shaved my whole body."

"And did the hair come back?"

"No. I have lain in my room ever since, until today, afraid to go anywhere."

"Did your mother see it?"

"No, I didn't want to tell her about it. I told her nothing till she began to ask why I didn't go to work. Then she begged me to come to you. She thinks I've had some kind of breakdown. I don't know where to turn. My God, what's going to happen to me?"

The doctor leaned forward now, smiling easily. "Actually this business isn't so extraordinary as it doubtless seems to you. These delusions of yours, for that is what they unquestionably are, are fairly typical of a certain kind of emotional upset with which we're quite familiar. I shan't go into the details right now. It will require a period of treatment, of course, perhaps even some hospitalization, but we can help you, I feel sure." He rose and moved toward the outer office. "I'll have my nurse set up a schedule of treatments for you."

THE DOCTOR went out, leaving the door slightly ajar. Slowly the doctor's words seeped through his consciousness, and relief grew in him. Delusions! All delusions!

He moved to the window. The poor fly still struggled in the web, each rash flutter of its wings tying it more inextricably to the sticky strands. Above it, the spider maneuvered ruthlessly for position to strike, to paralyze its captive with poison. Shuddering, he reached out toward the web, then drew back his hand in sudden fear. The spider swung out and dropped below the fly, trailing a strand which crossed the fly's body, binding it yet more tightly to the web. He moved toward the narrow opening at the bottom of the window, watching the despairing fly twist, kick, flutter, and struggle. There was no escape for it, no possible escape at all!

THE END

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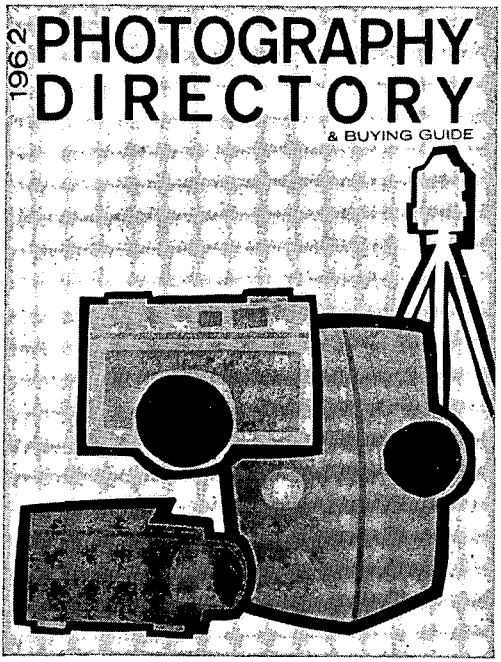

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A man's face, only partially visible, peered malevolently through the narrow peephole. The eyes were red rimmed and they glittered with a feverish light of unwholesome cunning.

See *The Human Zero*

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